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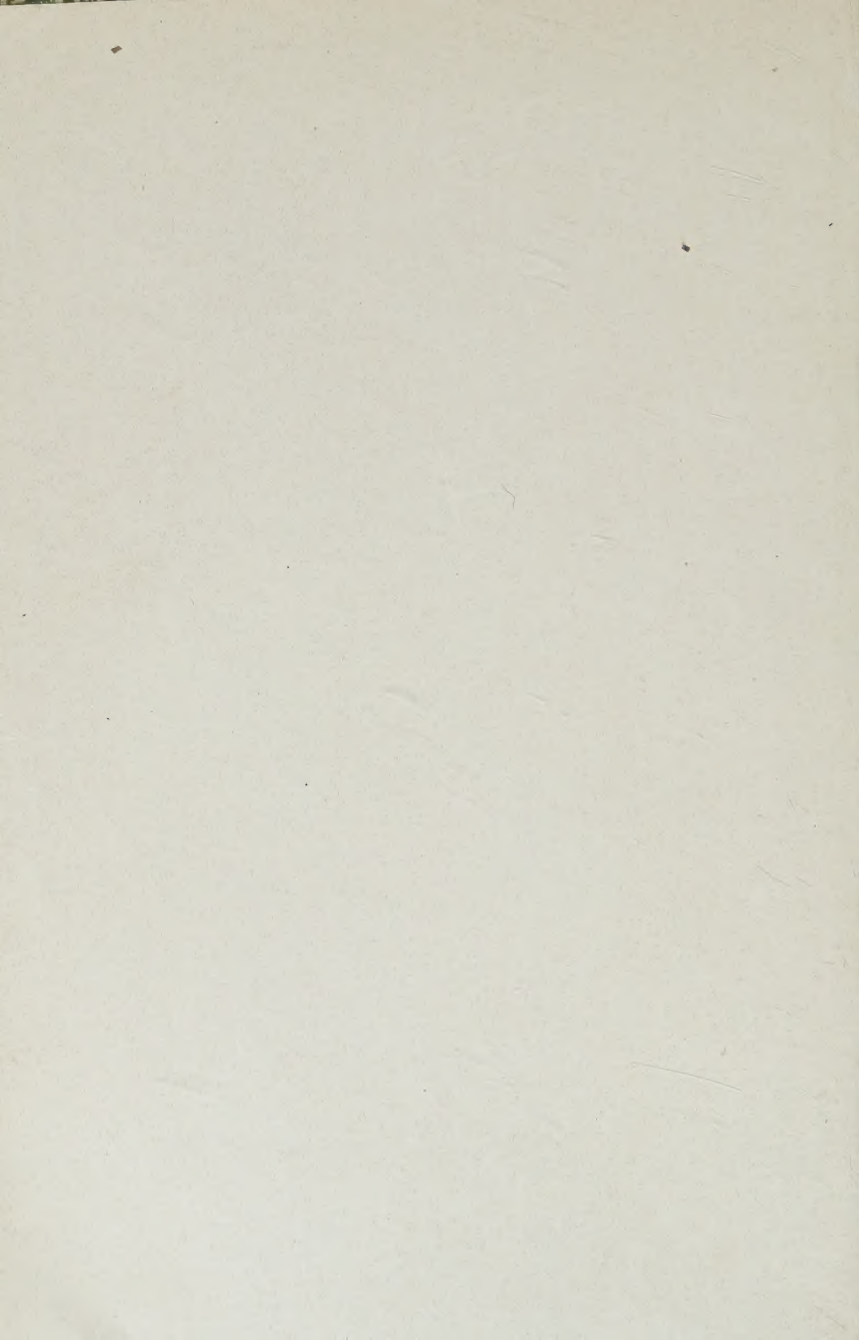
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LETTERING IN ORNAMENT

AN INQUIRY INTO THE
DECORATIVE USE OF
LETTERING, PAST, PRE-
SENT, AND POSSIBLE

BY

LEWIS F. DAY

AUTHOR OF "ALPHABETS OLD AND
NEW," "ART IN NEEDLEWORK," ETC.

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SECOND EDITION REVISED

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS, OLD AND NEW

LONDON :

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NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

As regards the letterpress, this edition is practically a reprint of its predecessor. Only such alterations have been made in the text as were necessary to correct one or two errors and to bring it up to date. Two or three of the old illustrations—which my father had never regarded as satisfactory—have been removed, a few have been newly reproduced, and some half dozen fresh examples added, the latter are taken for the most part from photographs collected some years ago with a view to a possible second edition.

RUTH DAY,

15 TAVITON STREET,
GORDON SQUARE, W.C.

March 1914.



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PREFACE

THIS is not so much a sequel to "Alphabets Old and New" as that is preliminary to this. The earlier volume dealt with the alphabet only, the forms of letters: the consideration is here their use in ornament, the way they have been and are to be employed in decoration.

The illustrations (of which a descriptive list is given) are chosen strictly with a view to illustrate, which will account for the introduction of my own designs: it was not possible always to find the fitting instance, and an obvious way out of the dilemma was to make a drawing.

Incidentally, however, the examples of old work here brought together show how universal was the use of Lettering in Ornament, how varied, how ingenious, and at times how beautiful. Haply they may serve as incentives to fresh invention; in any case they are valuable object-lessons in decorative treatment.

My point of view, it is hardly necessary to say, is that of the workman—who, if he is a good workman, is something of an artist too; and

what I have to say is addressed to those engaged in ornamental design or seriously studying it.

The historic side of the subject is dwelt upon because of its bearing upon the practical. The work of other days throws full on what is possible to-day a light, failing which, the best of us grope awkwardly in the dusk of perhaps very limited experience.

LEWIS F. DAY.

13 MECKLENBURGH SQUARE,
LONDON, W.C.

1st September 1902.

NOTE OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I AM indebted to many quarters : to Mr R. Anning Bell, Mr Walter Crane, Mr T. Raffles Davison, and Miss B. A. Waldram, for the use of their designs or drawings ; to Herren Gerlach and Schenk, the Imprimeries Réunies, Herr von Larisch, and Mr Harry Soane, for allowing reproductions from their publications ; to Miss Gimingham, for the loan of photographs ; to the Rector of Stonyhurst College, for sanctioning the illustration of Queen Mary's prayer-book ; to the authorities of the British and Victoria & Albert Museums, and especially to Mr A. B. Skinner and Mr G. F. Hill, for valuable assistance in the production of this book.

1st September 1902.

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NOTE

V. & A. M. = Victoria and Albert Museum.

B. M. = British Museum.

L. F. D. = Lewis F. Day.



I. IRON PURSE MOUNT.

I. INTRODUCTORY

Lettering has, over and above its practical use, and apart from any ornamental treatment of its forms, a decorative value of its own; and until recent times craftsmen of all kinds turned it habitually to account in their designs. More than that, lettering is (or was, so long as any care for it existed) in itself ornamental. A page consistently set up in good type—of one character throughout, after the manner of days when there was life in lettering, and not “displayed” after the distracting fashion of the modern printer—a merely well planned page is in its degree a thing of beauty. To that end, of course, the letters must be well shaped and well spaced; but, given the artist equal to the not very tremendous task of shaping them, or it may be of choosing them only and putting them together, mere type is in itself something upon which the eye can rest with satisfaction.

КЪНЕРЪСКРЪКА

2. RUSSIAN MANUSCRIPT.

To handle a printed book of the days when the printer cared for his art is a pleasure second only to that of turning over the pages of a fine manuscript.

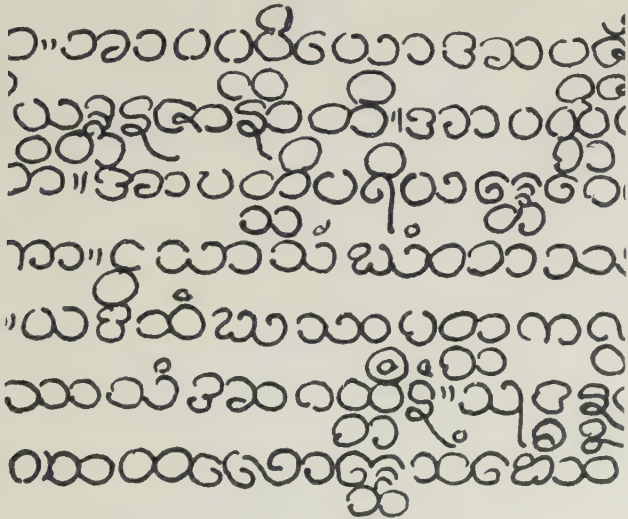
And this is no mere prejudice of the bibliomaniac, who, indeed, values books for reasons not intimately connected with the love of beauty. Decorative artists have in all times felt the charm of lettering, and owned it in their work; they have gone even to the length of inventing mock writing, when they had nothing to say by it except how thoroughly they appreciated the use of anything like an inscription in design.

Artists as remote from decorative tendencies in their own work as the painter of "The Angelus" have been deeply interested in lettering. It is told of J. F. Millet¹ that as a boy he used to write verses of the Bible on the wooden gates in the fields, choosing his text to fit the bars. Each letter, he held, had an intrinsic decorative value of its own; and its form meant something to him. He would describe to his son, in teaching him, how the top of the big G stooped over as if to drink out of the little goblet below; and he had a liking for the combination of letters

¹ H. Naegely. "J. F. Millet and Rustic Art."

in certain words, even in foreign words which he did not understand. WEYMOUTH, for example, struck him as a fine combination of letters to express a poor, thin-sounding word.

Another artist who would have repudiated any



3. PALI BUDDHIST MANUSCRIPT.

particular leaning towards the ornamental side of art, and who yet saw decorative value in lettering, was Robert Louis Stevenson, who, a year before his death, was bent on decorating the ruddy wooden walls of his house at Samoa with lettering. His idea was, to have made for him some



4. ICELANDIC INSCRIPTION.

hundreds of gilt letters on the model of "really exquisitely fine clear type from some Roman monument" mounted on spikes like drawing-pins. "You see," he wrote to Mr St Gaudens, "suppose you entertain an honoured guest, when he goes he leaves his name in gilt letters on your walls; an infinity of fun and decoration can be got out of hospitable and festive mottoes; and the doors of every room can be beautified by the legend of their names. I really think there is something in the idea." It was with reluctance he abandoned it. "I had a strong conviction," he wrote later, "in that I was a great hand at writing inscriptions, and meant to exhibit and test my genius on the walls of my house; and now I see I can't. It is generally thus. The Battle of the Golden Letters will never be delivered. On making preparation to open the campaign, the King found himself face to face with invincible difficulties, in which the rapacity of a mercenary soldiery and the complaints of an impoverished treasury played an equal part."

It is no mere fancy, then, of the book-lover or of the decorator, that lettering is worthy of its place



5. ARABIC INSCRIPTION.

in ornament. Lines of well formed lettering, whether on the page of a book or on the panel of a wall, break its surface pleasantly. It has only to be proportioned and set out with judgment to decorate the one or the other—modestly it is true, but the best of decoration is modest ; and it is not the least of the ornamental qualities belonging to lettering that it does not clamour for attention, but will occupy a given space without asserting itself. It gives at first sight not much more than texture or variety of surface ; yet, when you come to look closely at it, it tells you what could in no other way be so clearly conveyed. Symbols may be misinterpreted, pictures may not convey all that is meant, the written or the graven word tells what they cannot : there is no mistaking it.

At the same time, penned, painted, carved, or anywise adequately rendered, it is in itself decorative. This seems to apply to the script of no matter what race ; Egyptian hieroglyphic, Assyrian cuneiform imprint, Greek or Roman chiselling, Gothic penmanship, are all alike pleasant to see, quite apart from the meaning of the words, which may, as likely as not, be past our understanding. So too the writing of strange peoples everywhere, the Hebrew character, the Slavonic (2), the Pali of the Buddhists (3), the Runic of the Icelanders (4), the Cufic and the Neshki of the Arabs (5), and all manner of to us mystifying script, conveying to the unlearned absolutely



6. BYZANTINE IVORY CARVING.



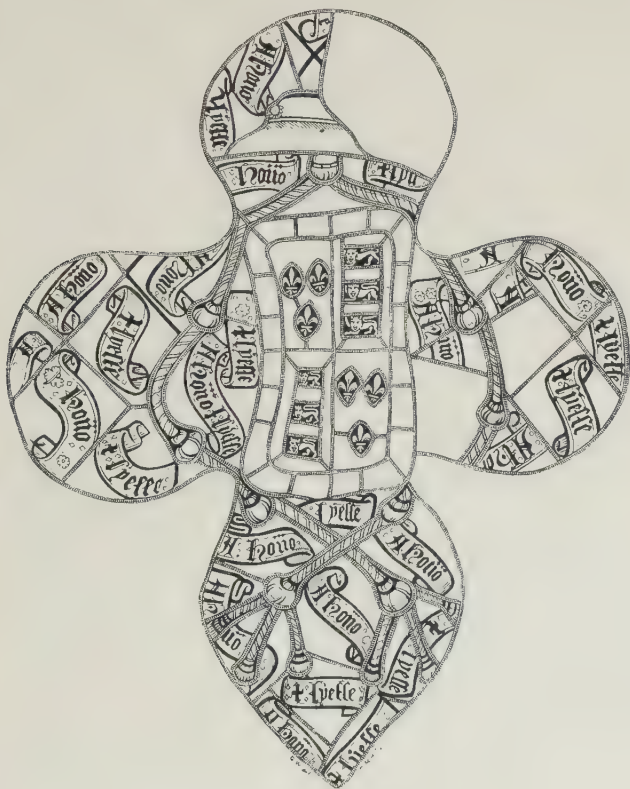
7. GOTHIC FURNITURE.

nothing of the meaning of the words, tell us one and all of the decorative value of mere lettering.

There is perhaps no more absolutely satisfactory simple way of breaking a surface than by means of well formed, well spaced lettering. In combination with ornament it has from the first been used by the decorator, and always with effect. On painted mummy cases from Egypt, in carved reliefs from Nineveh, and ivories from Byzantium (6), on coins from Greece and Syracuse, on Persian tiles and lusted pottery, on Gothic glass (8) and tapestry, on church embroidery and furniture (7), on leather bindings, in locksmith's and goldsmith's work (1 and 15) and all manner of craftsmanship, in the decoration of the manuscripts and books of all times (12), and on the seals and signet rings of all peoples, lettering in some form, often a very emphatic one, plays a decorative part.

In modern days we seem to have lost sight of its artistic possibilities. Only here and there an artist appears to perceive the opportunities it offers. William Morris himself did not, except in his printed books, turn it to appreciable account ;

though once at least Sir E. Burne-Jones in his panel of Perseus and the Graeæ (10) bound his



8. STAINED GLASS TRACERY LIGHT.

composition together by a broad overhanging belt of beautiful lettering across the vacant background

of the panel—very much as the medallist of the Renaissance before him clouded as it were the sky of his medallion (9) with inscription.

The use, however, of lettering in ornament does



9. RENAISSANCE BRONZE MEDAL.

not depend upon its association with picture. It is itself *the* graphic art. It takes the place of picture, and conveys in the surest way what might possibly have been conveyed by carved groups or painted

figure subjects, but not so precisely; and all this without calling attention to itself. There are abundant occasions when decoration ought not to attract too much notice, apart from those other



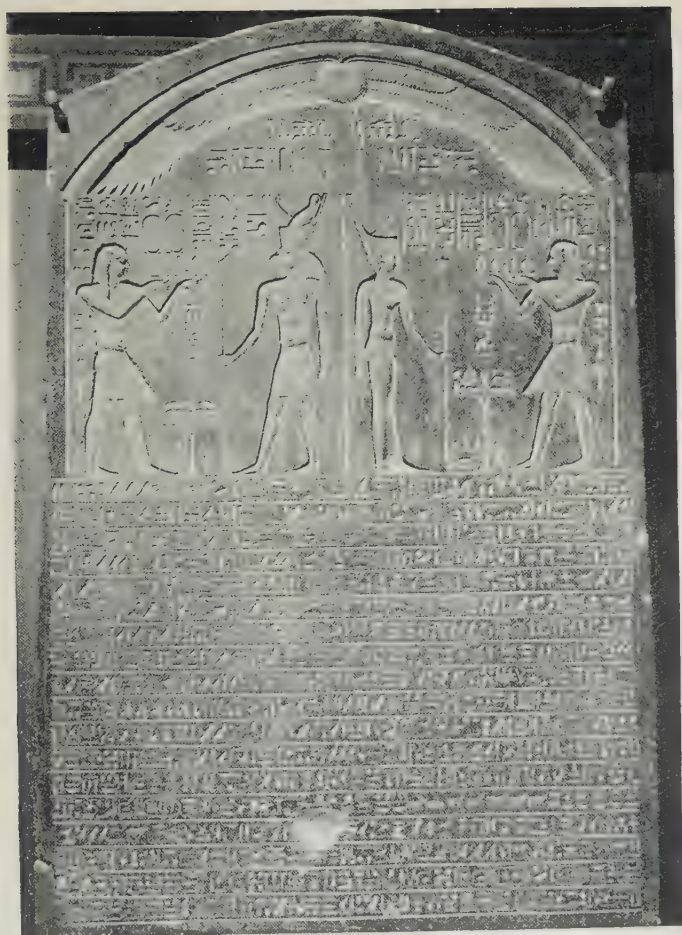
10. PERSEUS AND THE GRAEÆ, BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES.

occasions when adequate figure design is out of the question. It must be remembered (though it may sometimes suit us to forget it) that the moderate degree of artistic accomplishment which contents us in old work will not do for us in the productions of our own day. We have passed the period

of unsophisticated art when naïveté was possible, and are fast coming to the conclusion (if indeed we have not already reached it) that, decoration being in the nature of a luxury, superfluous in the sense that it is possible to do without it, only the best is to be tolerated, the best of its kind. Rather than feeble figure-work let us have good ornament; rather than poor scrollery let us have mere diaper, or some other simplest form of enrichment.

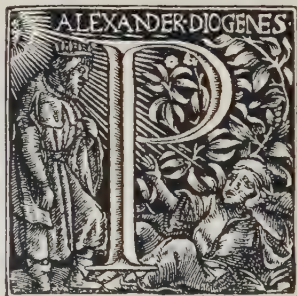
Here, surely, lettering comes in, an art within the scope of any decent craftsman—give him but a model to work from. For, to tell the truth, the pretty theory that the workman should be left to his own devices in design, works out in sheer waste of workmanship. It is not so much that invention is a rare gift, but that in the matter of taste, almost as rare, the workman lacks as a rule the culture which would keep him straight. With regard to absolute originality, there is not much scope for it in lettering; and when a man speaks of designing it, he means, as a rule, no more than that it is his handwriting.

Meaning plays by no means an essential part in ornament—the prime purpose of which is beauty; but it may be desirable, in addition to beauty, and the artist with ideas desires always to do something more than solve a decorative problem. Thoughtful artists turn to symbolism, with the result that they are hampered



II. AN EGYPTIAN STELE.

by it in their design, and perhaps led into a form of expression which conveys their meaning only to the smallest circle of admirers. The possibilities of symbolism stop suddenly short. The designer is faced by two alternatives. Either the symbols at his service are familiar, so familiar as to be hackneyed and commonplace, or, if they are of his own imagining, the interpretation of them



12. INITIALS FROM EARLY PRINTED BOOKS.

makes demands upon our sympathetic recognition to which only here and there an appreciative soul responds. It has continually been found necessary to explain the significance of symbols, and even to call in for that purpose the aid of lettering, which of itself would have sufficed without them. It is not as though symbols were of themselves invariably ornamental. The sign which best conveys the meaning of the artist may not, and in practice often does not, readily conform to the conditions

of design, and its forcible introduction into the scheme of decoration has consequently always an air of intrusion.

Lettering, on the other hand, is by nature most



13. CHAMPLEVE ENAMEL. HENRI DEUX.

amenable to treatment ; there are so many varieties of lettering, so many ways of introducing it ; and, given the artist accustomed to its manipulation, it can so readily be made to take its place in such a way as certainly not to mar the decorative effect, and most likely to enhance it.

A picture itself, or a piece of sculpture, conceived in the spirit of decoration, may gain no less in decorative value than in significance by the introduction into it of lettering in one form or

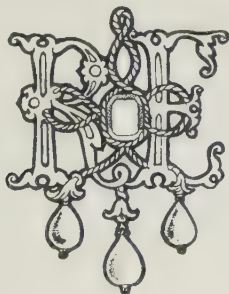


14. GOTHIC ENCAUSTIC TILE.

another. This lettering may fill, or just sufficiently occupy, a panel or a tablet; it may be introduced into the nimbus of a saint or on a label encompassing him; it may be as it were embroidered on the hem of his garment or

written across the folds of it, as was done in mediæval times—whilst the Assyrian of old boldly cut his cuneiform inscriptions right across his pictures in relief; it may be-diaper the ground, or otherwise enter into its decoration (6); the devices of the designer are more than it is here possible to number. In certain initials from early printed books (12) lettering at once decorative and explanatory is introduced into the subsidiary decoration of the capital letters.

Ornament, apart from picture, may gain still more from lettering, which takes, in turn, the place of figured story. It may form itself the staple of all decorative device, as in many an instance here given; it may be cunningly interwoven with ornament (13); it may be plentifully employed (14) or sparingly (170); it is equally ready to fill the most conspicuous place or to retire discreetly into obscurity; it is the most obedient servant of the ornamentist.



15. JEWELLERY, BY H. HOLBEIN.

II. THE PRINTED PAGE

The idea of lettering is so closely bound up with that of printed type that the book, from title page to printer's mark, naturally comes into consideration.

Due consideration of it from the printer's point of view would, however, lead us astray from the present purpose; it would demand quite a volume to itself. The very extent of the subject compels its compression within strict limits. It will be impossible here to do more than consider the page, printed or written, as a comparatively compact mass of lettering, the main business of which is to tell us something, but to tell it with decent regard for appearances: it would not otherwise come within our scope at all. The assumption that the appearance of the page is to be improved only at the cost of legibility, may have some grounds in the vagaries of artists wanting in respect for the art in which they dabble, but it is not founded upon any inherent incompatibility between what is beautiful and what can easily be read. Lettering may very well answer both conditions, and should do so. Is our newspaper type more legible than a fine Roman inscription? Any

advantage print may have lies entirely in the fact that the man in the street is more familiar with it. Modern improvements (?) in type have unfortunately been in the one direction of plain printing, leaving aside the question of beauty, with the result that the immediate effect of any artistic improvement in letter-shapes must be a degree of strangeness which, however slight, will strike people as less readable—not that it is really so. Only in so far is it true, that more beautiful lettering means lettering more difficult to read. Many a beautiful script which asks of us rather more attention than modern type, would be at least as plain to us if it were our ordinary reading.

There is not the slightest doubt that twentieth-century type might well be made more beautiful than it is. The obstacles in the way of doing it are, not that such type would be less readable, but that “practical” people have made up their minds that it would be, and vast commercial interests are engaged on the side of letting things be. The best we can hope for is gradual improvement, and that such slight changes as occur in the fashions of print may be for the better. It is well that artistic attention should be called to it, for something of all artistic doing trickles through into trade. The effort of William Morris has not been without effect. Printers who would most emphatically deny that they are converted to his opinions have plainly been influenced by his work.

In the case of the written page, as of the graven slab, the painted tablet, and other hand lettering (to all of which much that is here said equally applies), the artist is untrammelled except by public prejudice, which, if he deserves the name, he will to some extent ignore. It is the bounden duty of the calligrapher to obey the principle of beauty, to shape his letters as perfectly, and to space them as pleasantly, as conditions will allow.

The conditions of execution with pen, brush, graver or other tool will affect in most cases the shape of the letters. With regard to their distribution and arrangement, the conditions apply equally to page, panel, tablet, or any solid block of writing such as the rectangular patch of compact inscription adopted by Greek or Roman carvers when they did not frame it in mouldings or design a tablet for its reception.

Let us take the printed page as typical of the area on which a patch of lettering is to be spread. Experience proves that the eye is best satisfied by a tolerably uniform distribution of the letters, Roman, Gothic, or whatever their character, over it, so that they give at first sight the impression of a fairly even surface, distinguished from the surrounding surface (that is, the margin) more by a difference of tint than by any appreciable letter-forms within the mass.

The tint of print is, however, only relatively even: words are of uneven length; and there may

be other breaks in its continuity, occurring as the sense of the words determines, and just not as the compositor would have them. Nevertheless he is bound to accept them, not merely to take them into account, but to make the best of them, unhappily as they may come for him. He cannot, without forfeiting all claim to artistic feeling, shirk the difficulty of so scheming his lines that they are of equal length, that the words are as little broken as possible and never awkwardly, and that the spaces between them do not run into little rivulets of white wandering irregularly down the page, to its extreme disfigurement. Broad spaces of white between the lines of print intercept such ugly streams, at the same time that they make reading easier; but the comparatively even tint given by closely compact lines of type is more restful to the eye than distinctly marked bars of print. Here is, for once, a point of divergence between the most useful and the most beautiful way of doing it. It applies, however, more to printed books than to carved, graven, or written inscription.

In books, where easy reading counts for much and symmetry for little, it would be absurd to sacrifice convenience to effect, and to abandon any division or distribution of the text upon the page enabling us to grasp the meaning readily. We want our reading made easy: and there is not the least doubt that breaks in the type which correspond to breaks in the sense do make it

easier. The division of the text into words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, is a foregone conclusion, with which it is futile to quarrel.

The remedy for the undue preponderance of white, where a paragraph breaks the uniformity of the printed page, is, not to do away with paragraphs, but to break up the page into a number of them. That also makes it livelier and easier to read; and if to some extent it takes away from the importance attaching to a less frequent pause, the balance of emphasis can be restored by a distinctive form of letter at the beginning of the dominant paragraph, denoting a fresh start—which of itself may be made to add to the interest and beauty of the page. But the consideration of the initial letter belongs to another chapter.

An alternative to leaving a blank space at the end of a sentence, is to mark the pause by a printed sign, much heavier than the type of course (or it would not equally arrest the attention) and therefore no less objectionable than the plain paper: the recurrence of relatively solid black ornaments amidst the grey tint given by the type, is even more irritating than gaps of white in it. The sign, of something like equal weight with the text, by which the Greek scribe, say of the eighth century, marks a pause in the sense, is proportionately happier in effect, but does not meet the modern need for a signal which there can be no mistaking

even from a long way off. In fact, the demand for something more like "stops" is as old as the tenth century.

The proportion of the patch of print to the page of the book, the amount, that is to say, of margin left round the text, and the position of the patch upon the page, have very much to do with its appearance, and are very serious considerations



16. PRINTERS' MARKS.

with the artist. It has been attempted to define precisely how to place the print upon the page; but it is one thing to say this or that system answers well, and another to insist that only upon one system are good results to be got. The proportion of print to plain paper is just one of those points upon which an artist follows his instinct, and is not to be bound by rule: he works out rules for himself,

The double column owes its origin presumably to practical convenience. When the page was broad, and the type employed was not very large, the lines of print ran to such a length of words that it was not easy to carry back the eye and take up the next line with certainty. The obvious remedy for this was to have two shorter lines of print, with a sufficiently broad interval between them to divide the print into clearly marked columns. And the effect of this in early printed books was most satisfactory. In modern printing, where the space between the columns is reduced to a minimum (when will some really practical newspaper printer give us once more columns sufficiently wide apart?), the effect is not merely unpleasing but perplexing, the eye being continually caught by something in the adjoining column and led astray. Except, however, in very wide pages, excusable mainly on the grounds that they may be necessary to adequate illustration, the double column is no longer wanted, and is in fact so nearly obsolete that, where it survives, it has a distinctly old-fashioned look.

It is, nevertheless, no less effective than it is logical, to consider the two pages of the open book as one area on which to plant, as it were, two columns of print. A very considerable reduction of the inner margins, as compared with the outer and the upper and lower, has this effect; and it is perhaps the most satisfactory way of composing the page



17. ROUGH SKETCH DESIGN FOR NEWSPAPER HEADING.

—if only the binder were to be depended upon. Unless the folding of the sheets is perfect, the two patches of print do not range, and the closer they come together the more obtrusive is the fault: it is not so easily detected when there is a broad space of white between.

The ornamentation of the page, beyond the mere setting out of type upon it, is a subject apart. The only opportunity of the compositor for anything like free and fanciful composition is in the title page, where, again, he does wisely in curbing his fancy. Plain print in the body of the book seems to demand corresponding severity in the treatment of the title page, in any case the most difficult page in the book to set out.

Our type is a carrying on of the character which came originally from the use of the pen. It will always probably, perhaps it always should, bear traces of its origin: we do not want to wipe out the landmarks of its history. But there seems no

reason why this carrying on should not be also a carrying further, and in the direction, not of writing, but of printing, and even of type-founding. Why should not type bear on its face the evidence of that also?

As in the title page of a book, so in a newspaper heading (17), or the cover of a magazine, there is possible scope for design, more especially as they are not ordinarily printed from type, but from a block. Unfortunately, however, the publisher's idea of lettering is usually type, to which he would have the artist conform most strictly. The demand of trade is, further, for something which shall advertise itself on the railway bookstalls, which shall be unmistakably readable as the flurried passenger hurries past to catch his train, and at the same time fresh and unexpected. The dictates of art, on the other hand, suggest something which shall not shout itself hoarse.

It is difficult under such conditions to do more than design bold, broad and effective lettering, and to go as far towards mitigating its obtrusiveness as the publisher will permit; but one cannot help doubting whether the clever people whose business it is to gauge the public taste do not over-estimate its vulgarity.

Advertisement, into which lettering enters, and must always enter, largely, affords but little scope for art—it is a game of brag; but publishers and others who have an interest in announcing not



18. POSTER BY R. ANNING BELL.

merely what they have to sell, but the beauty and refinement of the things, might well trust something to the efficacy of tasteful announcement. Where, by chance, the responsibility for an advertisement sheet is in the hands of people not so much concerned about trade as about art, and they entrust its design to a competent artist, as in the case of Mr Anning Bell's announcement of the Liverpool School of Art, the result, though by no means legible at a glance, is something which, by its very distinction from the common run of flaring posters, attracts attention and holds it. For the rest, the only chance of the decorative artist in the direction of advertisement rests with the poster-humorist, who has found his opportunity, and makes good use of it—if not of lettering always.

To return, however, to the wider subject of the printed page, all that is here claimed on behalf of art is, due regard to its appearance. In the printing of books the ruling consideration is not beauty, but the sense of the author's words. The only question open to serious dispute is, how best to make that clear and easy reading, with least violence, if any, to the sense of proportion and beauty.



19. ALFONSO THE WISE, HIS MARK. A.D. 1254.

III. THE WRITTEN PAGE

The written page is naturally set out very much on the lines of print—itself, of course, originally modelled upon manuscript. In so far as type and manuscript seek the same end, they are subject to the same laws ; but only to that extent ; and the aim of the two is not identical.

The scribe of old was not so bent upon rapid writing that he had no time to consider its form, nor so intent upon ready reading that he dared not make the slightest demand upon the attention of

the reader. You may see that in Don Alfonso his mark (19). And to-day also when a page is penned it is not with a view to conveying the author's meaning in the plainest and most unmistakable way.

The craft of the scribe (as distinguished from the fluent correspondent) is not so utilitarian as that of the printer. The writer is free to indulge in luxuries of art which the printer cannot afford, at times even to sacrifice something of plain speech to what might be called rhetoric ; he has, by right of his pen, a faculty of taking liberties with the set form and mechanical order of letters, which the man of print has not, a power which insensibility only would neglect to exercise. When, as in the present day, caligraphy is employed no longer in writing books upon parchment but in penning the text to accompany some form of illustration (eventually to be incorporated in the printer's process-block), the free exercise of his power is the very occasion and excuse of the artist for venturing into penmanship. He is in a sort compelled to make the venture ; for the decoration of the page implies the sympathetic rendering of accompanying text.

The art of lettering is one which the decorative artist cannot afford to neglect ; not necessarily ornamental script, but plain, simple lettering—something which, when he is decorating a book, he may use in his designs, or with his designs, in place of type. Type is only too ready to his hand ; but

CARITAS GOTT GESANG IVLI .
 QVARZ FACVLTÆT ENTVORF.
 PALMETTE BVKOVINA DAGO
 BERT FVX SCHRIFT PSYCHE

20. INSCRIPTION BY JOSEPH PLECNİK, VIENNA.

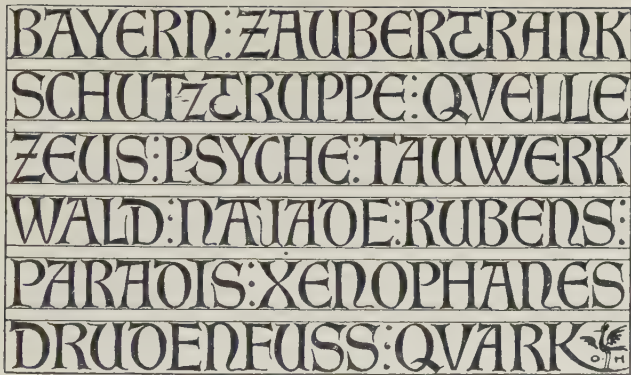
when it comes to finding a fount which will go well with pen or brush drawing, the choice is well nigh hopeless. Nothing seems to be quite right. If he wants something which shall not jar with his work, he must do it himself; and to do it satisfactorily he must be master of at least one form of lettering.

It is true that many an artist who has felt the incongruity of type, and therefore penned his own page, has only escaped from one trouble into another. "I hope," writes a distinguished author, apropos of the publication of his own poems, "it isn't necessary to put the verse into that rustic printing. I am Philistine enough to prefer clean printer's type; indeed, I can form no idea of the verses thus transcribed by the incult and tottering hand of the draughtsman, nor gather any impression beyond one of weariness to the eyes." Who does not sympathise with this protest against the bad work of perhaps a good artist? A man may be an excellent draughtsman, and yet in the direction of calligraphy no more expert than a child. But the choice is not between the bad

writing of the artist and the hard and fast type of the founder—of which two evils type may be the lesser; there are at least two other alternatives—that the artist should learn to write, or that he should get a sympathetic scribe to write for him.

Caligraphy is a term we use in speaking of the ancient or mediæval scribe, because he it was who wrote beautifully. The scribe who cultivates the art of writing is to-day rare, but the species is happily not extinct; and there is, at all events in some quarters, a rather general desire to master script, consequent upon the realisation of its use in design.

An artist may have no desire to deviate into ornament, and yet appreciate the advantages of penning his own lettering, or seeing it written under his own eye. It gives him, even if he accepts the alphabet as it is, in all its severe simplicity, the opportunity, not only of shaping it to suit himself, but of placing the letters where and as he likes; and, if he should want an even effect, of spacing them more perfectly than print allows. He can put letters just as close together or just as far apart as may seem fit to him, can spread, contract, persuade them even, by some slightest modification of the letter-shapes, to accommodate themselves one to another as ready-cast type cannot possibly do. He can give to capitals their relative importance, and emphasise his words in other ways than by the use of italics. In short, he can have his own way instead of going the way



21. INSCRIPTION BY OTTO HUPP, MUNICH.

of the machine—only he must have command of his implement, pen, or brush, or whatever it be: his writing must be adequate.

The writer does wrong to form himself, as he often does, upon printed type (his obvious model is manuscript, upon which that itself is formed), and especially wrong to emulate the regularity of print. He can get with the pen or brush qualities of more account than mechanical precision (in aiming at which he is at a disadvantage as compared with the machine), qualities beyond the scope of printing, and of a kind which differentiate his work from it.

It may be as well to exemplify the sort of evenness of distribution to be obtained in penmanship and not in printing. The writer has only to prolong a stroke to occupy the gap of white which occurs between two such letters as RT, or EV.

Or the gap may be avoided by the choice of a different type of letter ; it will be seen (diagram 22) how the choice of the straddling M fills up the space left at the foot of the letter F, and how it widens the breach after the letter A.

Writers of old never seem to have been bound hard and fast to one type of letter. Even in the same phrase various forms of the same letter occur, as if it happened so, much to the enlivenment of the page. And such variation shows regard (conscious or unconscious) to the way the various shapes compose. The playful variety of old lettering is one of the charms we find in it. How pleasant the surprise of the rectangular C occurring *once only* in the word ECCE, as we find it on the doors at Le Puy (diagram 22). One has less sympathy nowadays with the turning about of a letter to make it fit a space. That was all very well when writers were not particular as to whether the bar of the N slanted this way or that. We are no longer at liberty to make a P or S face backwards ; it is a device belonging to a stage of lettering more elementary than the one we have reached.

The same objection does not apply to the liberty taken on occasion with the size of individual letters ; but there should be occasion for it. It should be done with deliberate purpose—for the sake of compression, composition, emphasis, not out of mere wilfulness. It is reasonable enough to reduce the size of a letter in order to bring it into the desired

compass, to make it, for example, occupy the blank space which always follows the letter L—observe the compactness of the letters LOD and the want of it in LOI (diagram 22)—but to reduce an unfortunate vowel always to proportions at which it looks more like a stop than a letter, does not seem to justify itself on any ground of taste or expe-



22. DIAGRAM.

diency, except that it enables the writer to shirk the difficulty of penning a bold round O—a paltry excuse for pretended artistry.

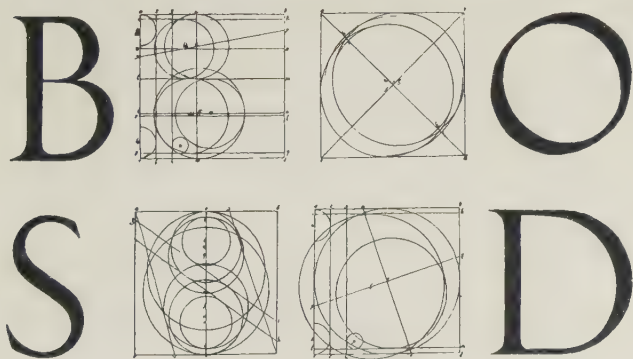
One is apt to resent mere wilfulness on the part of the scribe—variations, that is to say, not suggested by conditions of the case. We accept them readily when there is reason for them, and all the more readily when the writer consistently carries through the idea of compression, or whatever his motive may be. Old writers often saved space by enclosing one letter within another, as in the combinations DI, ON, VS (diagram 22).

Once in a while we are able to express by the proportions of a letter something not otherwise easily to be conveyed—as, for example, by reducing the size of a letter in the word MARY to indicate a pet name in which the R is familiarly dropped.

A useful rule of writing has been laid down by Herr v. Larisch, from whose “Beispiele Künstlerischer Schrift” two very different instances are given (20 and 21), to the effect that the letters of a word should be so contrived that the ground-space between them is always equal (not the distance between their extremities); but that is possible only on condition of taking occasional liberties of the kind already mentioned. The Viennese artist, it will be seen (20), adopts the old German device of writing the double T in GOTT as one letter, and the Bavarian (21) dwarfs a Z when his composition requires it.

When it comes to the modification of the letter-shape, in what is ostensibly plain lettering, the penman is on rather dangerous ground; but he may safely lengthen the limbs of letters, or otherwise extend or compress them, so long as no impression is conveyed of torturing them, or of trifling with a script which has serious business to do. The impression of affectation is easily produced by undue liberties with the proportion of letters. The bar of the A or of the H is not once and for all fixed; it may be shifted a trifle higher or lower without hurt; but the fashion, not merely of high-

waisted letters, but of waists gradually rising almost to their necks, becomes absurd. It is one thing to depart from orthodoxy, another to go beyond the bounds of all moderation. It is only in moderation that freedom of hand is here claimed, and only on this ground: that the proportion of the



23. DIAGRAM TO SHOW CONSTRUCTION OF LETTERS.

letter itself is of less moment than the aspect of the word, the line, the page, in favour of which the letter must be sacrificed.

The variety which is the charm of handwork comes naturally to the writer who is ready with his pen or brush; and, if for its sake only, it is incumbent upon the decorator, and especially upon the ornamentist, to master the art of lettering. He need not be adept in lettering of all kinds, but at least he should take some one character, Roman,

Gothic, or whatever may best suit his style of work (of course, a fine type of letter, not common newspaper print), and master that, make it his, get as expert in it as in writing a running hand. Let him acquire, in short, a hand of his own; it need be no more like print than his epistolary hand is like a writing master's; it should be in every sense his own handwriting.

Elaborate diagrams (23) have been devised to show the geometric plan on which letters are supposed to be built. These are of some use in helping to explain the exact proportion of their parts; but a draughtsman should be able to draw without all that amount of compass-work. The construction of the alphabet appears to have been first worked out in the fifteenth century by an Italian, one Felice Feliciano; after him followed Fra Luca Paccioli; but the best known diagrams are those of Dürer, who in his book on proportion (1525) gave twenty-two pages to them, and yet the types of letter he adopted are by no means unimpeachable.

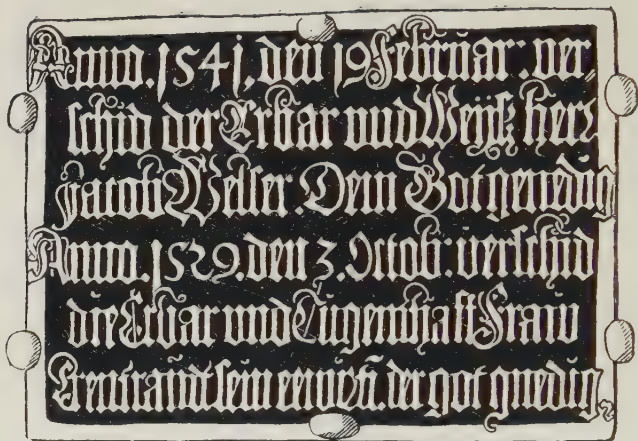
The fact is, all this mathematical jugglery is beside the question of art, and especially of design. It is not so that letters are designed, nor anything else. The artist must learn to write—painfully if he should have no turn that way; but when it comes to lettering, he must do it straight off; that is necessary to spontaneity, without which it will never be anything but cramped. There are occasions when exceptional care is necessary, and



24. TITLE PAGE BY W. EDEN NESFIELD.

a high degree of finish and exactness; but there is no middle course between direct penmanship or brushwork and most carefully drawn lettering. There is not much to be done in the way of touching up letters which have been freely put in. It must be one thing or the other.

Spontaneity, it should be explained, does not imply rashness in setting out writing, or carelessness in penning it. The lines should be straight, of equal length, and at equal distances. The soul of the scribe must not be beyond measurement or calculation. It is not till he has taken the necessary precautions, mechanical and other, that he can safely go ahead and write freely.



25. BRONZE FROM A GRAVE AT NUREMBERG.

IV. MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS

What has been said of manuscript applies in great part, and often with even more force, to the kind of inscription designed rather to be a record for those who care to search for it, than to serve as an announcement to the world—not so much an advertisement as a confidence.

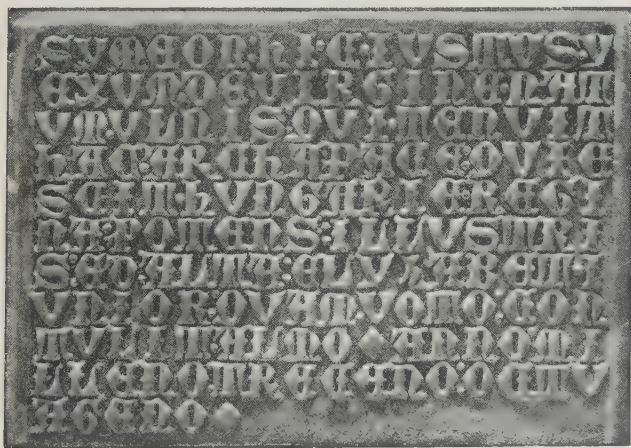
The architectural carver, or the monumental engraver, has no less absolute control of his letter-shapes than the penman. He is himself controlled by the serious purpose and position of his work; and in proportion to these must be the severity of his lettering, as well as the stateliness with which it is ordered.

Nesfield's lettering in the title page of his "Specimens of Mediæval Architecture" (24,

is unmistakably very much what he would have designed for a brass. There is a dignified austerity about it not usually to be found either in the printing or the penmanship of his day.

Of such importance may be the dignity of letter design, that some facility in reading is readily to be sacrificed to it. It is not imperative that an inscription should be read as you run ; enough if it is apparent that there is an inscription which, if you care to pause and study it, you may read.

Accordingly, the rules which apply to print or manuscript may in monumental inscription be relaxed. It is no longer necessary to keep the lines of lettering wide apart so as to form horizontal bars of text ; they may follow closely one upon the other,



26. EMBOSSED IN SILVER-GILT, DALMATIA.

and the words themselves may be closed up to form a compact mass. In place of orthodox punctuation and of the ordinary division into sentences, the artist may mark the pauses in his own way. Should it be by the interpolation of flowers, badges, or other ornaments, these may now be, and usually will be, of equal weight with the lettering, it being no longer so necessary to make reading easy as to present a dignified inscription. The utmost the reader has a right to ask of him is that there shall be no possible mistake about it when he comes to study it.

Architectural dignity is best preserved by the adoption of the simplest and severest character, and by distributing the lettering in the evenest and most formal way. The style of it must depend upon that of the architecture; but straight-lined characters, Roman or Gothic (27, 28), seem always to take their place in a building more as if they belonged to it than any florid writing; and this is especially the case with carving in stone or engraving in metal; anything in the nature of a flourish is more appropriate to the pen or brush. There is no possible rule, however; an artist is guided by his feeling in such matters, and if he has taste it will guide him aright. The beautiful panel of lettering, well deserving its place of honour in the tomb of Mary of Burgundy, at Bruges (28), shows that it only needs the competent artist, and he can, without offence, give play to his fancy even in serious monumental design. It will be seen that he



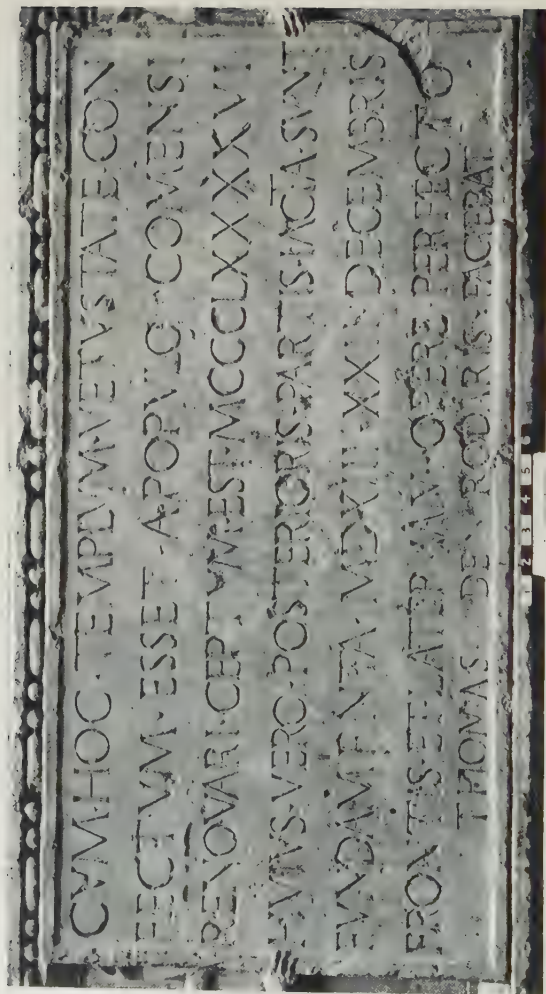
27. RAISED LETTERS IN MARBLE.

reserves in this instance the more fantastic flourishing of the letters for the base of the panel, where their work is over and they may safely be playful.

Inscriptions are written by common consent in

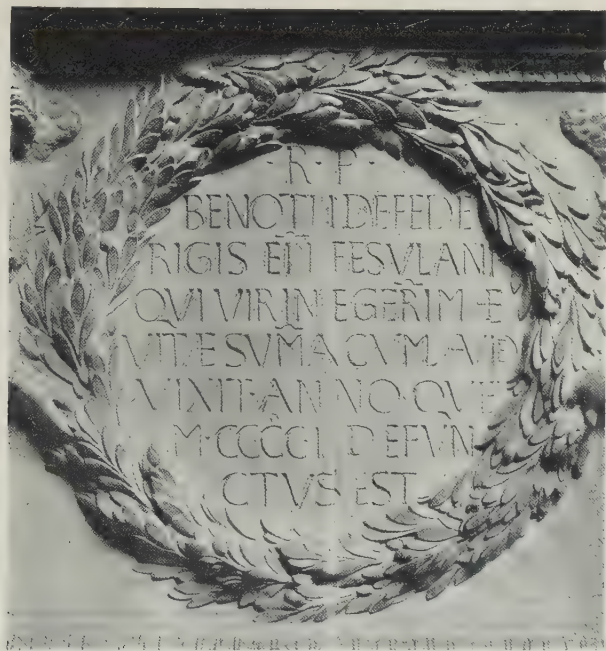
horizontal lines. It is not so universally conceded that the lines should be of equal length, and form therefore a compact rectangular mass of lettering. This may not be possible in the case of an ample inscription within, let us say, a wreath, which was at one time common enough (30). The lettering must often in that case perforce follow the lines enclosing it. But similar or other fanciful distribution of the words occurs also where there is no such reason for it, where no framing lines constrain the writer. In that case he loses something of the dignity and decorative value of inscription by straying from the straight line: there is virtue in its verticality. Even should there be some reason against a simple four-sided patch of lettering, the lines may with advantage be grouped so as to give at least a rectangular figure. An edge meandering in and out unmeaningly, or following a florid framing line, is a thing to avoid. And if the frame compels it, the fault was in designing a frame so ill-adapted to its purpose. The rectangular space is invariably satisfactory (26). Given a frame to fill, the designer of an inscription must do his best; and a competent artist will make the best of even a very bad job; but, clearly, the better way to set about lettering in decoration is, to set out the inscription before designing a tablet or setting of any kind for it—to design, in fact, the frame for the lettering, not adapt the lettering to the frame.

To the inexpert a word or two may be accept-



29. INCISED STONE, COMO CATHEDRAL.

able as to the setting out of an inscription. There may be many ways of doing it. Mine is one which works out satisfactorily. It is this :—

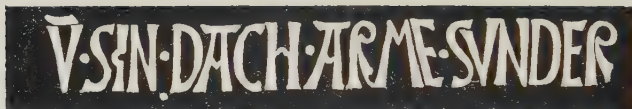


30. INCISED MARBLE, LUCA DELLA ROBBIA.

1. Imagine about how you think the inscription would subdivide—say into so many lines (long or short according to your scheme of design).

2. Write one line as it comes.

3. Count the number of letters in the line



31. CAST IRON FROM A GRAVE SLAB.

(reckoning the space between word and word as equivalent to one letter).

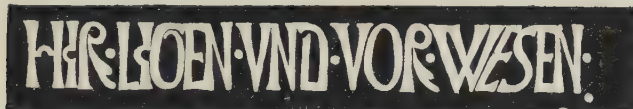
4. Reckon to how many lines your inscription will run, and how this number of lines will suit your space.

5. If it does not accommodate itself, you may have to begin again ; but each successive guess is likely to be nearer the mark than the last.

6. Having determined that your inscription shall be in so many lines, averaging so many letters, at such or such a distance apart, the next step is to note (upon the rough copy of the words) where the lines would end, and how the words would be broken.

7. You will probably find that, by a little readjustment, taking a letter or two from one line and including it in another, you can divide your inscription into lines containing each a number of letters which, by a little compression in one case and a little distension in another, will give lines of equal length, without the necessity of breaking any word awkwardly. Very awkward words might possibly involve a reconsideration of the whole scheme.

8. Having determined finally the words which

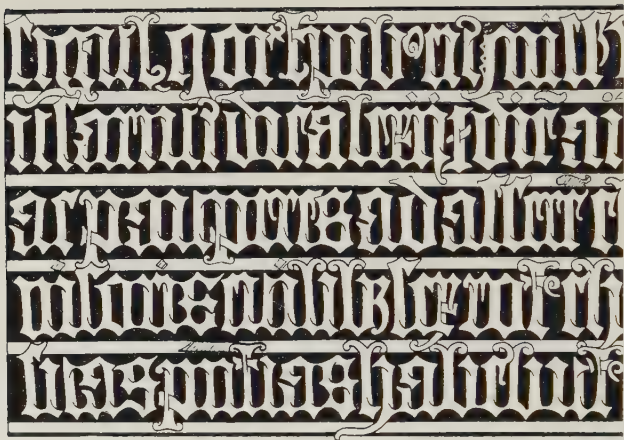


S. JACOBI, LÜBECK, 1599.

shall occupy each line, you sketch in the letters lightly, of course, because only tentatively. It is not until you have quite satisfied yourself as to the spacing of the words, that it is safe to begin with the pen, brush, or chisel. A false start is fatal.

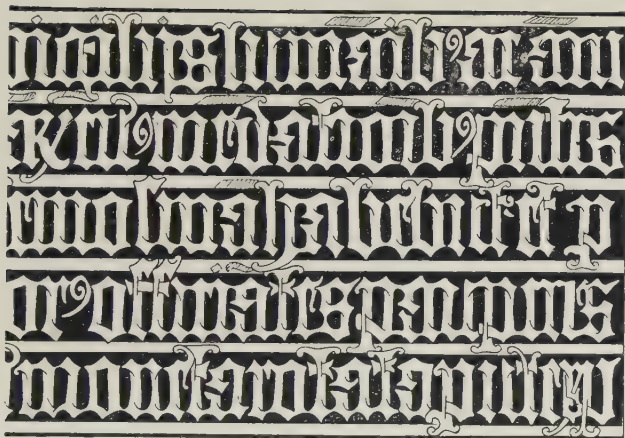
9. In finally adjusting the letters, some compression or distension of the words may, it was said, be necessary ; but it is the *line* that has to be closed up or spread out ; there is not much to be done with a separate word or two, without danger of disfiguring the text. It must seem as if the lines were of equal length ; any clear evidence of a word being squeezed in, or long drawn out, tells against the writer. The possibilities of contraction within the compass of a single word are greater when the artist is free to use conjoint letters, or otherwise take liberties with the form and proportion of individual letters. A rather extreme instance of making free with the normal letter-shapes is given above (31).

Apart, of course, from the style of letter determined by the architecture of a building or monument, is the character which comes of its execution in stone (27, 29), or metal (26), and of its standing up in relief upon a sunken ground (27), or being



32. RIBBON-LIKE GOTHIC

cut into the surface (29, 30, 37). The face of the letters may, indeed, be carved, and sometimes is, especially in wood; it may be modelled, and sometimes is, in clay; and there is no precise limit to the relief or modelling in which the artist may on occasion indulge; but it is not often that it is desirable to interfere with the flat surface of lettering; there is a danger of frittering away the valuable surface of the material; and the forms of most letters express themselves sufficiently by their outline alone. Even the so-called ribbon letters (32), in which the turnover of the ribbon needs to be expressed, want little more than one sharp cut to express the fold. To insist upon nearer resemblance to ribbon is to indulge in a



INSCRIPTION FROM A FLEMISH BRASS.

florid form of lettering remarkable, not for architectural dignity, but for a certain playfulness, pleasing indeed, but ill-suited to very serious and sober decoration: it is not so much lettering in ornament as ornamental lettering—which is not the subject of this chapter.

There is less occasion, then, in architecture for actually modelled lettering than for letters cut into the ground or left in flat relief upon it. Either expedient is in its place equally perfect. In incised lettering the surface of the slab is preserved; but the simple “grounding out” of the letters, leaving the metal, stone, or wood intact, to form their face, is also a sure way of preserving their breadth of surface. It is quite commonly employed in brass

and bronze, plain strips of metal (measuring perhaps as much as twice the thickness of the strokes of the letters) being left between the rows of writing, broken only by the tops and tails of tall letters engraved across them, and by an occasional initial (32). This expedient of the band was, in fact, almost necessary for the accommodation of the projecting parts of the minuscule letters ; certainly it has invariably a good effect.

The grounding out of letters upon brass was sometimes done with a view to filling in the space with black or coloured mastic ; but the sunken parts, being beyond the reach of the polisher, soon tarnish in any case, and deepen of themselves in colour, with the result that the letters tell light and bright upon it.

So in the case of wood or stone, the surface of the raised letter is apt to get in time a polish which the ground does not. A sunken ground is commonly adopted in black-letter inscriptions, in which the upright strokes come close together ; and there is seldom any broad surface of ground between. In the case of Roman letters, or Gothic letters more or less of the Roman type, there are apt to be gaps in the ground, which give rise to

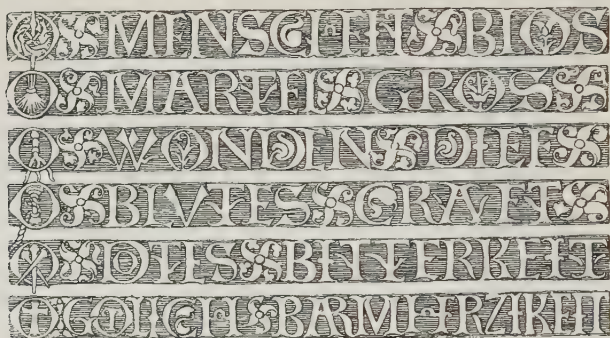


33. DIAGRAM.



34. SANDSTONE SLAB, REGENSBURG.

the occasion, if not the need, for ornament of some kind, in order to preserve the evenness of the inscription. The danger may, however, be evaded by closing the letters up and minimising the space between them, especially if the inscription is in channels with plain raised bands between. A



35. BACK OF CARVED PINE CH. STALL, 1510.

similar plan of crowding out the background may be employed with good effect by the penman or painter. By merely drawing his letters in outline as close together as he can and filling in the background, he gets a character in his lettering (33) quite different from that which would result from painting light letters upon a dark band. In the case of black-letter inscriptions, the engraver of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries often, as before said, made incisions in them to suggest the turnover of a strap or ribbon, playing indeed slight variations upon that simple idea with admirable effect; but he was happiest when he was content to suggest a turnover and did not want to imitate it.

The flaw in black-letter inscription is the incongruity of the capitals used with it. They break the

line perhaps happily, and relieve the monotony of an exceptionally rigid form of minuscule; but they rarely seem to belong to it (25). The capitals on page 53 are much more in keeping with the other letters than those at the head of the chapter; but really satisfactory capitals to go with black-letter have never been, and are perhaps not to be, designed. This is a matter of less practical importance to us, seeing that the days of that particular character are, except for occasional purposes, already passed.

There is no reason why grounding out should not more often be employed in stone or marble when the scale allows it; it is employed to admirable effect in the wooden pew-end above



36. OLD ENGLISH PEW-END.

(36), and in the inscriptions upon the much earlier doors of the cathedral at Le Puy (40).

Small lettering is more naturally cut *into* stone, as the cuneiform and Greek and Roman inscriptions invariably were, and as was often the case in Italian inscriptions (29, 37). In the little Byzantine iron shield at the end of the chapter (38) the incised lettering is filled in with silver. Between sunken letters and letters in relief, the choice is determined partly by the consideration as to which is the easier to do, partly by which will be the more secure from injury; when neither would be difficult and either would be safe, it becomes a question merely of effect. The lasting character of lettering on a sunken ground, in metal, is witnessed by numberless mediæval monumental brasses, in which the decorative use of lettering is shown triumphantly. We have only to compare these with the tombstones of a later date to see how monumental lettering may be used to artistic and to ineffective purpose. Which of the two it might be, was in the past very much a question of period: engravers of the seventeenth and eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries fell on evil days for design: with us it is a question of taste. We have lost hold of tradition, but we have freer choice; and out of our eclecticism, may I call it, better things should come—if we but take the pains to inform ourselves. The



37. MARBLE GRAVE SLAB FROM SANTA MARIA
DEL POPOLO, ROME.

work of a man who knows what master workmen before him have done, must needs be better than he could spin out of his own ignorant imagining.



38. IRON INLAID WITH SILVER. BYZANTINE.



39. IVORY CARVING OF THE TENTH CENTURY.

V. DECORATIVE LETTERING

Many and various were the methods of introducing inscription into decorative design. It found its way even into picture, until the time when the pictorial ideal ceased to include decorative effect. Long inscriptions claimed for themselves, as a rule, a place apart; shorter ones were used sometimes to frame the picture, sometimes to form part of it.

In introducing lettering into decoration, people accustomed to write in horizontal lines from left to right naturally adopted that direction. They might occasionally be led by considerations of design to scheme an inscription otherwise; but, in the main, decorative lettering takes the horizontal direction. Such, in fact, is the decorative

use of some such horizontal bands as lettering gives, that one is inclined to suspect that inscriptions have often been introduced into design quite as much for the line they gave as for the information it was desired to convey in them.

About the earliest and most uncompromising use of inscription that we know of is seen in the well-known bas-reliefs from Nineveh (eighth and ninth centuries B.C.), in which broad belts of cuneiform lettering deliberately cross the picture in a way which, brutal as in a sense it must be called, is not sheer brutality, so useful is it in the composition, and so little hurt is there to broadly conventional sculpture of that kind in a treatment which, applied to more delicate workmanship, would be downright cruel. We find indeed something of the same kind in quite late Gothic tapestry and wall-painting, where the names of the personages represented are sometimes written straight across their drapery.

The gentler treatment is to write only upon the background to the figures, where the horizontal bands or belts of lettering are of use in crossing narrow upright spaces between the figures or between the figure and its frame, and in binding the parts of the composition into one.

Another use to which bands of inscription are commonly put is to separate tiers of small picture panels one from the other, as, for example, in the narrow lights of tall Gothic windows, which they hold together in a most satisfactory manner. A



40. PART OF A DOOR OF THE CATHEDRAL AT LE PUY.

very pronounced use of bands of lettering to separate little figure subjects is made in the doors of the cathedral at Le Puy, of which a portion is illustrated (40). The lettering there is on a proportionately very large and important scale; but it holds its own perfectly both with the ornamental borders and with the figure subjects. The carving is of the simplest kind, mere flat "grounding out," but the effect is singularly rich; and certainly not the least interesting part of the design, when you examine it in detail, is the lettering. It proves to be Latin hexameters, explanatory, of course, of the incidents depicted, running right across the four divisions of the doors. The upright post between the two doors (to the right of the illustration) shows another use of lettering. Clearly, where all about it was so full of pattern, that called out for enrichment. Why should not the carver make use of it to sign his name? And who is not grateful to Master Godfrey for the way he has done it? He could hardly have devised ornament more effective or more fitting.

There is no need to multiply instances of pictures kept apart by interspaces of lettering. The mediæval decorator delighted in a multitude of little figure groups, and he knew no better way than this of separating them—nor do we for that matter, though nowadays we are not so fond of lettering.

It is no uncommon thing to find in one and the same mediæval composition inscriptions treated



41. SILVER-GILT COVER TO A COPY OF THE GOSPELS WITH
SLAVONIC INSCRIPTIONS, 1519.

in a variety of ways. The designer had the wit at the same time to diversify his design and to make his meaning as explicit as might be—after all, words are the most explicit form in which to convey it—and he succeeded in making them subserve an artistic purpose also (41). There is a Flemish tapestry at the Victoria and Albert Museum representing the Seven Deadly Sins (1485—1520), in which the names of Jeremiah, Justice, Pity, etc., are written across their bodies, whilst the words of the prophet occupy a scroll.

It is a rather important point in design that in a single composition different forms of inscription should be adopted only to convey different kinds of information; and that, *vice versâ*, different kinds of information should be conveyed in different ways. What is necessary to intelligibility may be made so, to contribute to decorative effect.

Of old it did not occur to the writer to introduce all manners of writing into his design; he confined himself habitually to one form of letter, varying perhaps in scale, or in the manner of its rendering, but in its main lines the same throughout—for the simple reason, it may be, that no other was familiar to him. To-day we turn our knowledge of many types to the worst possible account in mixing them together. Our scraps of knowledge lead us continually into danger. It is often desirable, and even necessary, to make some words stand forth in a design, and others to shrink back; it is the business of a designer to give

such words as he may introduce their due and precise value, to make some perhaps larger than others, some more solid, to reduce certain of them to relative insignificance ; but reason and art alike demand that all should be in one handwriting.

Natural as it is to write from left to right, and useful as cross bands of lettering are in counteracting the upright lines in figure composition, the



42. ENGRAVING ON COPPER BY H. S. BEHAM, 1542.

artist has always felt himself free to depart from the usual practice when that did not suit his purpose. If he had no need of any definite line, he preferred perhaps merely to break the surface of the background with quite irregular lettering. He made bold, if need were, to place the letters of the words in vertical instead of horizontal order, or to scatter them about the ground more in the form of a diaper; perhaps he preferred to write them on a tablet or a scroll (42) designed to receive them.



43. STONE GRAVE SLAB, GOTLAND, 1316.

or to introduce them into the details of the picture itself. The nimbus of a saint was, for example, so convenient to his hand, that it seems almost as if it must have been designed to be inscribed with his name. The mere writing of the letters in a ring round his head was enough to indicate a halo.



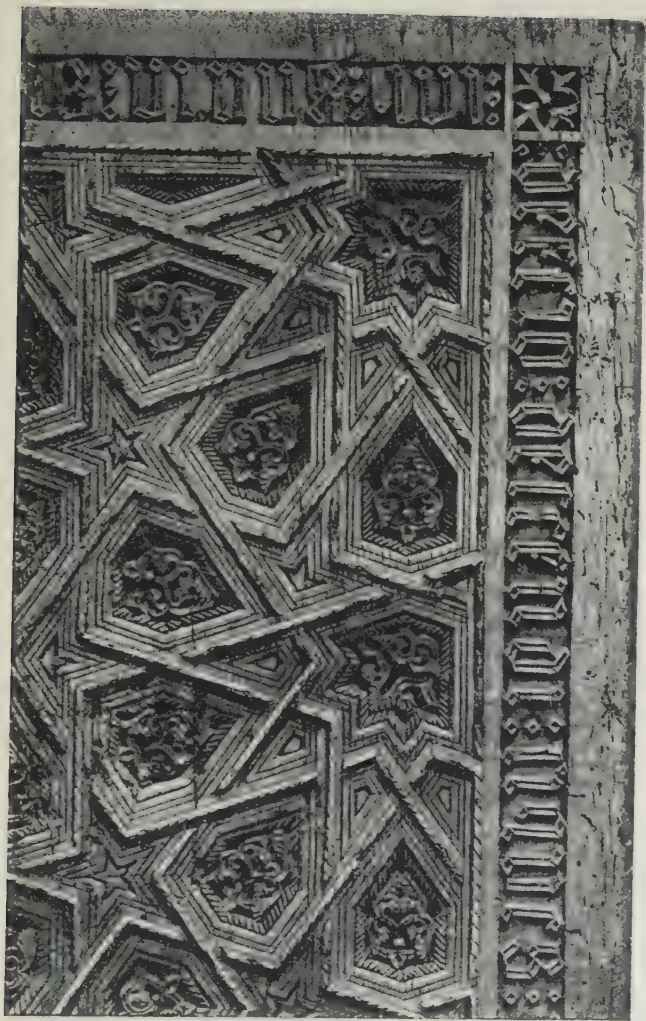
44. OLD STAFFORDSHIRE EARTHENWARE.

A device employed in tapestries and stained glass windows was to introduce the name of a personage in the hem or border of his garment, or as a pattern in the stuff, as though it had been woven in it or embroidered on it; but the limits of that kind of thing are soon reached.

The horizontal band, so common on flat surfaces, becomes, in the case of a vessel circular in plan, a belt of inscription, very valuable always in

emphasising the roundness of a vase, and sometimes in correcting its proportions. Quite rude instances of this occur in the mugs and other common earthen pots decorated in "slip" after a Staffordshire fashion of the end of the seventeenth century (44). More refined examples occur in old Greek vases ; but there the inscriptions are so delicate that, reduced to the scale of our illustrations, they would hardly be seen. They are, in fact, so inconspicuous that, but for the fact (pointed out to me by Sir Cecil Smith) that they occupy a position of honour in the scheme of Greek vase painting, one might take them to be an afterthought of the designer.

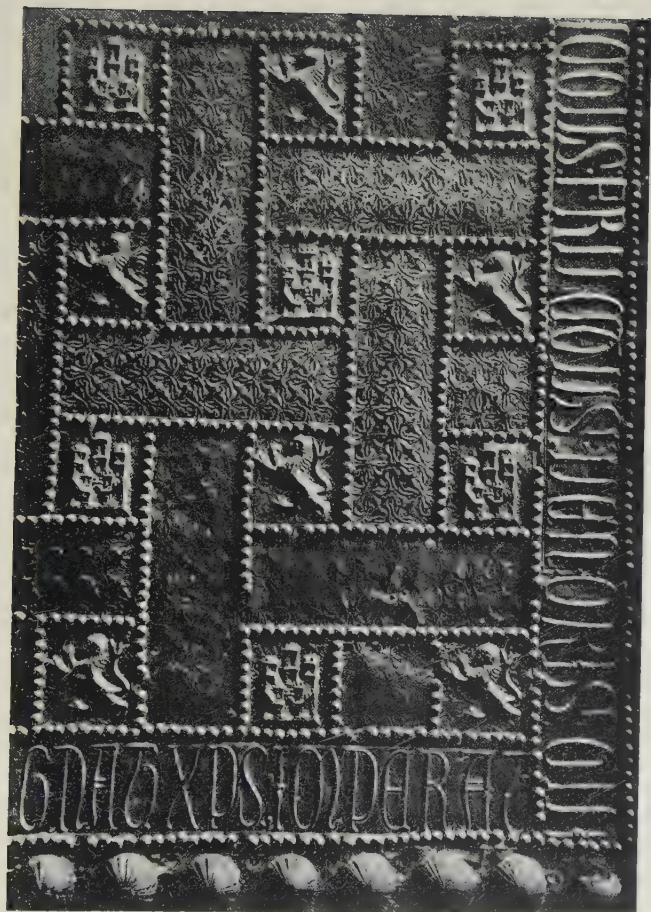
The lip, the neck, the shoulder of a vase may each in turn conveniently be decorated in this way, the words engraved on silver, painted on pottery, enamelled on glass. Successive rings of lettering, with or without other ornament between, make excellent decoration, which, as the wording is never seen all at once, does not assert its meaning. The Hispano-Moresque potters frequently introduced bands of mock Arabic inscription into their lusted earthenware, preferring, it is said, not to profane the name of the Prophet by putting it upon the infidel market. They also hashed up into ornament the Roman and Gothic character, not perhaps knowing the havoc they were working with its sense. The practice speaks for the value of lettering in ornament ; but it does not justify mock inscrip-



45. PART OF A MOORISH DOOR, WITH GOTHIC INSCRIPTION.

tion, for which there is no honest place in decoration. If something like lettering is wanted where there is a reason why real words should not be used, it should be within the power of an artist to design ornament having nearly enough the value of lettering without ever making any pretence to be inscription.

Lettering makes a very good border—not merely in connection with ornament, though there is scope for that too in very broad borders, but by itself, as may be seen in many a grave slab (43) and old brass, where it frames a monumental effigy or heraldic device as effectively as any pattern would do. The letters make, in fact, pattern enough, excellent and appropriate in proportion to its severity. The formality and rigidity of letters make for that steadiness which is so desirable in a border; the parallel upright strokes of Gothic black-letter, of which an orientalised version is given (45), fulfil very much the same purpose as the rectangular lines of a Greek fret; but it is seldom that lettering comes amiss. The one objection to a border of lettering is, the difficulty there is likely to be in reading it from one position. That, however, does not apply to brasses and tombstones which you can walk round, or to a thing like a book cover, which you take in your hand and turn about. Moreover, the difficulty is in great measure got over, say in the case of a door, by making the inscription run uninterruptedly round only three sides of the thing, and on the



46. PART OF AN IRON DOOR IN TOLEDO CATHEDRAL.

fourth (or bottom border) making it read as in the top one. This is seen in a portion of an iron door from the cathedral at Toledo (46).

In a circular disc, where the ring of inscription is precisely analogous to the rectangular frame to a slab, the lettering naturally follows round, in case the thing is small enough to be handled. In case it is not, the difficulty of changing the direction is not always very happily managed, as may be seen in the mark of Alfonso the Wise (19); nevertheless it is good lettering.



47. GREEK COINS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

For coins, seals, medals and so forth, lettering proves to be the absolutely perfect border. Enclosed within marginal lines or without them, incised or in relief, singly or in double row, it frames the portrait or the coat of arms effectively, giving weight to the design just where it is wanted. Not the least serviceable use of it is where it is made to pass, as it were, behind the image, forming something between a border and a background to it. Boldly used it never comes amiss. It is only the mean lettering of an artist who does not value it, would rather not use it, and is in fact

half afraid of it, that is uninteresting. The great medallists who have given it the importance it deserves have never had cause to repent it.

For all the value of the ring of inscription on a



48. GREEK COINS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

coin or medal, the scope of the designer does not end there: that is one way of doing it, but not the only one. It is the hard and fast rule we have adopted in modern days; but the Greeks, who were our masters in art, and the medallists of the Renaissance, knew better than to act on any one

mechanical idea. The Greeks, it will be seen (47, 48), wrote the inscription across the coin, or in an upright line, or in two such lines,



49. ITALIAN RENAISSANCE MEDAL.

or in one horizontal line (as a base for the figure), and lines at the two sides of the coin, and even in four straight lines giving a square within the circle. Framed in double lines of inscription (48) the figure is, as it were, set in

a diaper of lettering. Other devices are where the ground between the symbolic creature and its encircling wreath is diapered with lettering (48), where the inscription is confined to a rectangular



50. ITALIAN RENAISSANCE MEDAL.

frame within the circle, and where single letters are used to balance the composition (47)—and all this during the finest period of design. Another beautiful use of single letters is seen in the ivory carving of a later period (39).

The medallists of the Renaissance, as well as

the Greeks, often wrote inscriptions across the background to a portrait head (49, 50). A second ring of incised lettering, within the outer band in relief (51), is a convenient means of occupying the field of a medal without either confusing two separate inscriptions or calling undue attention to the less important of them.

Some modern medallists make good and characteristic use of lettering, but they employ sometimes too much of it to keep it bold enough. Its proportion in the design of so small a thing as a coin or medal is all-important. The temptation appears to be to make it too small; but it seems to have been the constant endeavour of the great medallists to keep it as large as possible.



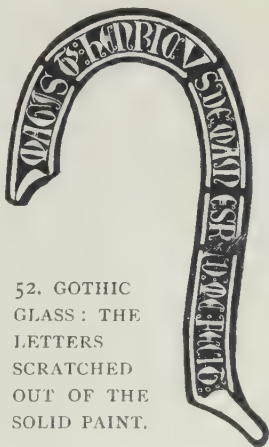
51. ITALIAN RENAISSANCE MEDAL.

VI. SCROLLS OR LABELS

A device from which very happy effects of decoration have resulted is that of a label, scroll, or ribbon, to bear an inscription. It is a means at once of giving distinction to it and of introducing into the composition lines invariably useful.

Its origin is not far to seek. A strip of parchment made a convenient ticket on which to write a name or description. Such labels must often have been attached to things upon which they were more or less a disfigurement. The artist naturally preferred to

paint, or carve, or weave his own label; and it seemed to him to give actuality to the thing if he represented also the buckling and the curling over of the ends of parchment, an accident sure to occur to it in the end. When he found that the



52. GOTHIC
GLASS: THE
LETTERS
SCRATCHED
OUT OF THE
SOLID PAINT.

turning over of the ends led to a characteristic form of ornament, he naturally developed the idea ; and so we get the ornamental label, severe at first, eventually, as taste became more florid, twisting about in the most fantastic fashion. It takes, finally, the fluttering form of ribbon ; but the effect was happier when it was less flimsily conceived, in the likeness, that is to say, of more robust strapwork.

Labels of the squarer ticket-like shape were often represented as if attached by pins to the surface of the thing they adorned. Longer and more strip-like labels were invariably turned over or curled up at the ends ; sometimes the ends were first split and then so treated. The twisting and twirling of the label itself was an affair partly of the reigning fashion of the day (severe in the thirteenth century, florid in the fifteenth), partly of the function of the particular label in question : it might not allow much scope for fancy, or, on the other hand, it might almost demand to be turned into ornament.

The label is seen in its simplest form on the drug vases of the Italian majolica painters, just a band of bold inscription between two lines which, upon examination, turn out to be the edges of a simple label, the indelible, and, at the same time, ornamental, substitute for the common parchment ticket. The broad horizontal bands, also, which separate the subjects in a fourteenth or fifteenth century stained glass window, suggest the parch-



53. CARVING FROM THE CHOIR OF THE CATHEDRAL AT ALBI.

ment scroll; and so do the phylacteries in the hands of prophets and others, though these are



54. PART OF AN IVORY READING DESK.

made also to take a form more deliberately ornamental, in order to occupy the background, or conveniently to cross the body of the figure.

The sculptured figure from the wonderful church at Albi (53) is one of a series of prophets holding each his label, which both crosses the figure and occupies the background. It need hardly be pointed out how useful the line of the scroll is in the composition of the panel, and how well it contrasts with the name of the prophet horizontally incised in bolder lettering on the flat background in a line with his head. A commoner and more conventional form of label is that on the first page of this chapter (52). Such a label was planned to occupy the space about the head of the saint, descending in front of him; the turn-over at the end was grasped in his hand. A similar but more elaborate use of the label occurs in fourteenth-century tapestry, where it is seen curling about the heads of the personages, making quite a pattern in the upper part of the picture, or perhaps (55) all over the background. Labels, together

with initial letters, are cleverly introduced into design more purely ornamental in an ivory reading desk of the sixteenth century (54), where they greatly help to balance the design.

The use of the label as a repeated form in ornament is not so common ; but it is sometimes effectively used, as in the tracery of a window



55. TAPESTRY IN THE HÔTEL CLUNY.

(8), where it makes a most appropriate accompaniment to the central shield of arms. It is used also, for the sake of the meandering line given by its recurring form, in the broad borders of engraved brasses and appliqué embroidery. At times, too, other short contrasting scrolls



56. PLAQUE OF GUBBIO FAÏENCE.

cross it at intervals, at an angle calculated to steady the flow of the foliage.

The label is employed sometimes in coins, medals, and the like, but without so much reason. There is rarely need for it or room for it; the available space is better given to the lettering itself. It is happier as the border of corporation

or other important seals, and in medallions of larger dimensions it forms often a useful feature, the ends, as they turn about, satisfactorily occupying the vacant ground. They are made even to fill it with their flourishing, as in the rather typical



57. PLAQUE OF GUBBIO FAÏENCE.

examples of Italian majolica illustrated (56 and 57), in which the twisting of the label is a little too obviously designed to fill up. It is, no doubt, one very valuable use of the twisted scroll, that it does fill up a space; but it ought not to strike one at a glance as devised merely with that end. In so doing it confesses itself

too plainly a makeshift. There is less danger of betrayal when it is cunningly contrived to bear just the words wanted, and just as they should come; which is hardly the case in these Gubbio plaques, in both of which the label is, in fact, better suited to the inscription of two words than of one. The fact is, the label asks rather more conscientious design than we must expect from the Italians of the Cinque Cento.

It was said above that enclosing shapes should be designed with a view to the lettering to be inscribed upon them; and this applies with especial force to the label, which should be schemed to accommodate the words upon it. In fact, the position of the words needs first to be planned and the label designed to take them. Given an existing space, it is the business of the artist to fit his design to it; but no practical designer would of his own accord first twist about a label and then begin to consider how best he could arrange the words within its lines. As well choose a canvas irrespective of the picture to be painted on it. The lettering is here the picture, so to speak, and the label but the canvas for it; and, however fanciful its convolutions, they should be so contrived as to accommodate, not merely so much wording, but such and such words in the order of their reading.

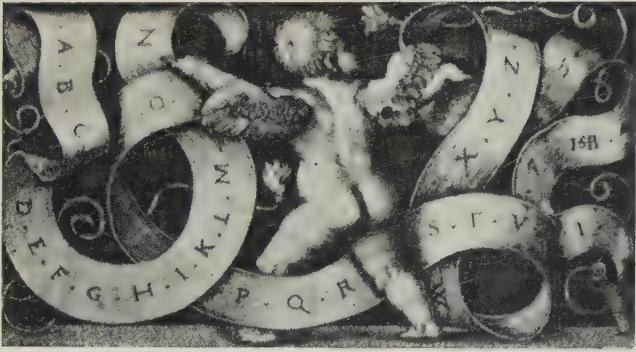
The question occurs as to the way the lettering ought to run. Should it conscientiously follow



58. A BOOKPLATE BY H. S. BEHAM.

the course of the label? should it be confined to one side of the label? should it be hidden where the label dives behind an overlap or disappears behind the figure? Naturally it should do all three; but the ends of art are not so easily achieved. An inscription strictly following the course of the label would, if that happened to turn upon itself, as well it might, be seen lying sometimes on its back and read from right to left, and so be difficult to follow; at times it would be lost to sight under a fold, and not be readable at all. Only in the case of words designedly disguised, or so familiar that from one or two of them we guess the rest, can the artist safely let lettering stand upon its head or disappear from view. He is compelled, therefore, if he wishes to be intelligible, to treat his label, not as an inscribed band twisted into ornamental shape, but as a band first twisted into shape and then inscribed with the desired words so that they can be seen and read. He has, in fact, frankly to accept the label as a convention, and not pretend that it is a real scroll. Realistic representation may at times be possible; some may think it desirable; but in any case it does not go far towards meeting the conditions of ornamental design.

Accepting the label, however, as a convention, a game of ornament, it is part of the strict game to confine the writing to one side of it, and, by rights, to follow its course. The artist has the



59. ENGRAVED ON COPPER BY H. S. BEHAM.

determining of its direction ; it is his business to compel it into the way it should go. You may tell a good workman by the conscientiousness with which he keeps to the face of the ribbon and follows the flow of its convolutions. It is easier, no doubt, to ignore all such considerations, and write haphazard ; but that is a poor excuse for not playing fair.

In effect the artist designs his label and on the visible parts of it he inscribes his words ; what he does, in fact, is to plot and place his words, and about them to devise a label. They give him certain short lengths of scroll, which he accepts, trusting to his invention to find lines which will supply the necessary continuity. Should he fail in that, he tries the words in different order. An ingenious designer seldom finds himself compelled

to break up his inscription awkwardly; he does not, for example, introduce a fold in the middle of a word; rather he reserves the fold to mark a break in the wording. He is careful to avoid the impression that his lettering was in any sense an afterthought. He designs the label for the words; and design is, literally, forethought.

It is not pretended that labels have always been scrupulously designed. Artists even who ought to have known better have before now shirked the difficulty of design, in so far discounting the merit of otherwise masterly work. It will be seen that the robust designs of Hans Sebald Beham are not in this respect above reproach; in the one case (59) the letters flow evenly on, but are written upon both sides of the label; in the other (58) the words do not follow the direction of the label.

The Germans of the early sixteenth century made extraordinary use of the label in their design, more particularly in association with heraldry, and, to a man almost, designed it, as they did their mantling, with unfailing vigour and effect. A curious and perhaps unique instance of the length to which, already in the fifteenth century, they carried the device occurs in a carpet in the Victoria and Albert Museum, a portion of which is illustrated opposite (60). The ornament consists almost entirely of inscription. The main lines of the design are bands of lettering. They outline the border,

have been mechanical. The labels and the letters on them are coloured in the most arbitrary fashion, with a view to colour combination and not to the division of the words, except in so far as it was the idea purposely to confuse them and prevent them from staring out of the carpet. This is not playing the game according to the rules laid down ; but at least the artist makes no pretence of doing so. He makes bold to start a game of his own, a game in which a label may change suddenly and incontinently from one colour to another, and the colour of the letters too. At all events, the inconsistency of the colour scheme is followed through with a consistency compelling you to realise that there is here no evasion of the problem of design, but a deliberate device to disturb the monotony of wording which would otherwise insist too much upon your reading it. In just such a spirit the old Hispano-Moresque potter would break up the invocation within the border of a plaque thus : AVE.MARIA. GRA.PLE.NA., to give at least variety of form to words familiar to the point of wearisomeness.

The label is a device to bear lettering ; and here again the vertical lines of black-letter seem, as it were, made to go with it ; but, Gothic or Roman, or whatever the character of the lettering, it should be upright ; the effect of slanting letters or italics on it is never happy.

Instances are to be found of labels bearing no

inscription ; and they would make satisfactory ornament, were it not that, by association of ideas, they inevitably suggest the want of lettering. Their use, however, in this way is proof of the ornamental value of the label.



61. OLD GERMAN LETTERING. FIFTEENTH CENTURY.

VII. HIDDEN MEANINGS

It has been contended in these pages that, though the first and usual purpose of lettering is that it shall be read with ease, there are occasions when easy reading is of secondary consequence (so long as it is readable enough), and that the more important consideration is decorative propriety. It is further maintained that its very legibility may under certain circumstances be endangered, and more than endangered, in the cause of ornament. Plain reading is by no means the invariable purpose of lettering in ornament, and it is a mistake to suppose that it ought always to be read at sight, or readable at all, except to those whom it may concern. It may be introduced only for the satisfaction of those who have the key to its meaning—in which case all that the outside world has a right to ask is that it shall be ornamental ; a sign or symbol which is a blot upon the design is indefensible from the standpoint of art.



62. INTERMINGLED NAMES.

There are times when wording may be introduced into design with the deliberate purpose of escaping too ready detection, perhaps of mystifying. A truthful man is not bound to blurt out everything; there are moments when it is wiser only to suggest. Art is not advertisement.

Instances innumerable occur in which the meaning of the words an artist may introduce into his design ought not to be obvious, when it would be nothing short of an offence if they were too plainly readable. This is especially the case where a sentiment is conveyed in them; we do not shout our sentiments from the housetop; and the more tender the sentiment conveyed in the words, the more becoming it is that they should be spoken under the breath.

A certain mystery about the wording of a sentiment is of the very essence of its tenderness. If upon the marriage chest of old the carver intertwinéd the names of bride and bridegroom, if upon a bridesmaid's locket the goldsmith of to-day enamels the initials of the pair, if the one sees

fit to introduce into his carving the other into his enamelling a pious wish, a prayer for their happiness, would he, being a man of delicate feeling, so shape the letters that who ran might read? Would he not in his discretion preferably reduce them to ornament which, though decipherable to those concerned, did not advertise an intimate thought or feeling to the world? It often happens that the right thing, and the only thing to do, is to express what we have to say so reticently

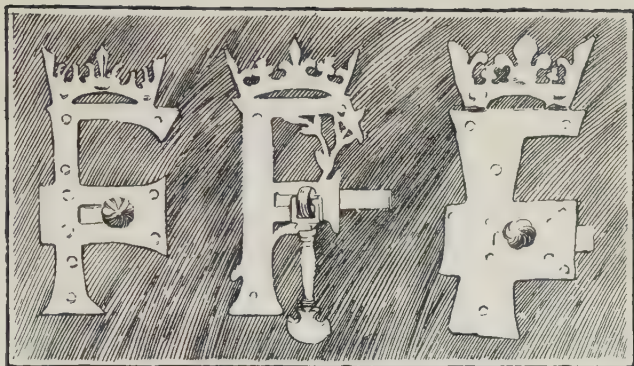
that, whilst the few for whom it is written will be sure to catch the meaning, the attention of the rest of the world shall not be called to it. We do not by preference play love tunes on a trumpet.



63. OLD SOMERSETSHIRE
PEW-END.

The name of Allah figures largely in Moresque ornament, variously written. Precisely what liberty the artists took with the Arabic character, I do not know; but they could hardly take too much. There seems to be a sort of reverence in veiling the

name of the Deity, and there is little likelihood of its being misunderstood. Would any pious Christian

64. IRON BOLT-PLATES. FRANCOIS I^{ER}.

miss the meaning of the words upon the scroll ingeniously composed to occupy the background to a picture of the Annunciation? One reads them by anticipation, and they may safely therefore be reduced to a form which in itself would not be easy to decipher. There is little difficulty in following even the most intricate of ornamental lettering when the very position of the words puts the reader on the track of their meaning. That, of course, is the justification of inscriptions such as that at the head of this chapter (61); elsewhere it might be unreadable, occurring where it does in the Gospels, it explains itself at a glance, SECUNDUM LUCAM. The use of the words is little more than a formality; they might almost be "taken as read."

The desirability of not clearly stating a meaning,

still less of emphasising it, gives rise to the use of single letters only hinting at it (63). Even then the letter need not stand revealed in the naked form of the familiar alphabet. The florid initials upon the façade of the château at Blois make more satisfactory ornament than the bald N which figured upon the walls of public buildings in Paris in the time of Napoleon the Third : there was about that an air of advertisement in harmony only with the cheapest form of Imperialism. The F of François I^{er} was put to all manner of decorative purposes. The crowned F in the form of a bolt-plate (64) is just a little too self-assertive. Better for all purposes than the simple initial was the cypher, commonly used by Henri II., or the monogram—to which a chapter by itself is devoted.

Enough has been said to account for the meaning of lettering being hidden by the artist. The ways of hiding it are many. The letters themselves may be so playfully treated as to be disguised ; they may be intricately interlaced, they may branch out into confusing ornament, or be half hidden in scrollery intertwined with it.

In the case of the cunningly-designed initial page from Mr Walter Crane's "Book of Wedding Days" (65), the June roses grow from thorny stems which spell the name of the month, half lost in leaves and further hidden by the cupid errant with his shield. A much simpler growth of ornamental lines is enough to transform words



into ornament out of which the meaning emerges as you look.

In the masterly design of Israel van Meckenien (66), the letters of his name, Israel M, are deliberately designed to look like scroll-work merely, in which a casual observer would not suspect there lurked a meaning. They form, it will be seen, a fine panel of florid ornament, satisfactory decoration apart from the significance of the lines on which it grows. The confusion, more or less, that may result from interlacing letters not in themselves very fantastic, is seen in the rendering of the word PROPHET (76). Where two separate words are interlaced (62), the disguise is naturally more complete, each, as it were, en-



65. A PAGE FROM
THE "BOOK
OF WEDDING
DAYS," BY
WALTER CRANE.

tangling the sense of the other. By merely taking liberties with the letters themselves (to some extent necessitated in order to adapt them to fretwork in ivory) the Portuguese artist responsible for the cabinet in the Cluny Museum from which the words AUDEO-SPERO (130) are taken has brought them to the desired condition of ornament which does not thrust its meaning on you.

A simple means of preventing words from staring at you is, to break the continuity of the letters by colouring them arbitrarily, as was done in early Saxon manuscripts. The obtrusiveness of individual letters may be guarded against in a similar way by breaking them into parti-colour, so that the forms which strike the eye are only parts of letters, and do not insist upon the fact that they have a meaning. The particular character employed in the old German embroidery from which the letters overleaf (67) are taken, seems to us at this date hardly to necessitate further removal from the obvious; but the needle-woman evidently meant to make sure they should not be too evident; and so not merely confused them with ornamental foliation and tendrils, but rendered them in colours which may be said to blur any possible distinctness of statement conveyed in them. Severer forms of letters might with even more reason be treated in the same way and so reduced to ornament. The sculptor or modeller may arrive at a similar result by varying



66. ENGRAVING BY ISRAEL VAN MECKENEN.



67. GERMAN GOTHIC EMBROIDERY.

the relief and the texture of his letters instead of the colour.

The fringe of cloisonned letters dependent from the seventh-century Visigothic crown (68) is a singularly happy device; barbaric it may be, but admirably ornamental. This is a votive crown, it will be understood, designed to be hung up before a shrine, not worn on the head. It was dug up in the neighbourhood of Toledo, and one seems to trace in it the influence of Eastern ingenuity in ornamental device. By no possible chance could the name of the donor, RECESSVINTHUS, intrude itself. It is there by way of record; to the casual observer it is ornament.

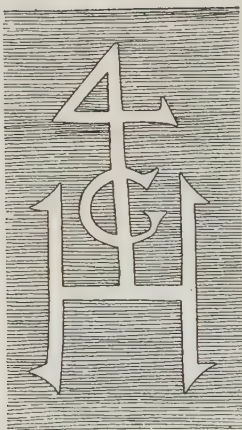
The degree of illegibility permissible in ornamental lettering is determined only by the purpose of it. What is meant to be hidden may well lie hid from all but those who have the key of the mystery. Even where the secret is an open one, there may be a charm in the mystery in which it is wrapped. If it is a riddle, we have a right to expect it to be possible of solution. If it is meant to be readable, it should not puzzle us beyond measure. It is

annoying to suspect, as we cannot help suspecting, that the designer meant us to unriddle many



68. VISIGOTHIC VOTIVE CROWN OF THE 7TH CENTURY.

a seventeenth and eighteenth century cypher, which, after all our pains, remains to us a mystery. The handsome panel from a cabinet in the Victoria and Albert Museum (104) has all the



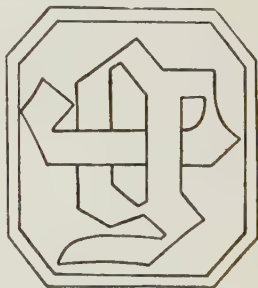
69. MERCHANT'S MARK.
1616.

air of telling us more than it does. Was that the intention of the carver, or was it not?

A printer's or a merchant's mark (69, 70) is often built up of lettering not easy to read; and it need not be readable; it is his sign, known to be such; and that is enough. So, too, a stamp, such as that which forms the tail-piece to this chapter (78), might well be less easy to read than it is, and yet

perfectly fulfil its function.

It is difficult for us to realise how clearly the meaning may be expressed in lettering which we do not understand. All the unlearned can say of the Icelandic (71), the Slavonic (72, 73), the Chinese, the Arab, or other to them strange character, is that it is most satisfactory as ornament; and the fact that, as such, it interests them, speaks eloquently for



70. MERCHANT'S MARK.
C.E.G.

the decorative use made of it. Possibly it would strike us as less entirely ornamental if we could read it; we find it perhaps all the more ornamental because it cannot possibly intrude upon our ignorance; but there is no doubt of its being ornamentally rendered.

It seems certain, too, that the Eastern artist was allowed an enviable liberty of rendering, which enabled him to reach something like the perfection of lettering in ornament. The short and seemingly simple inscription on the Persian mirror back (74) is not to be read right off. Even an accomplished Orientalist takes his time to puzzle out the words, "O, thou satisfier of wants." The writing of the Arabs is, of itself, enough to show that they were not often in a hurry. In the use of it in ornament they took it for granted that the reader would be more than leisurely. Prohibited by the laws of the Prophet from picturing God's creatures, and desiring, after the manner of mankind, to say something in their design, they indulged profusely in inscription; and their natural



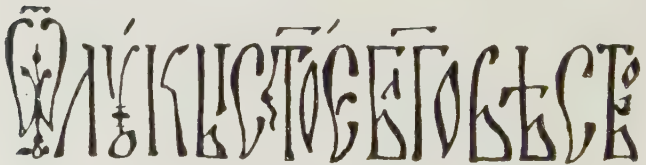
71. ICELANDIC
MANGLING IM-
PLEMENT.



72. RUSSIAN ORNAMENTAL LETTERING BY VICTOR
VASNETZOFF.

ingenuity and ornamental instinct not being hampered by any popular prejudice against free and fanciful treatment of the alphabet, they did marvels in the way of beautiful design, more elaborate it is true than is our Western wont, but undeniably the work of masters in their art (74).

Lettering forms one of the most striking features in what we call Arab art. We find it in the lustrated tiles, the enamelled glass, the fretted brass of the Persians; in the plaster-work of the Alhambra and other buildings of the Moors in Spain; in the wood-carving of the Tunisians; in the embroidery of the Turks; in Saracenic silk-weaving; in illuminated copies of the Koran; throughout, in fact, the whole range of Mohammedan design. The power of the artist is shown in the perfect



73. SLAVONIC INSCRIPTION OF THE 16TH CENTURY.

ease of his treatment: he can play with it; and yet, for all his playfulness, it never degenerates into frivolity. He reduced to ornament even the early monumental chisel-cut character, the rigid and angular "Cufic," not very much like lettering to us, except that by its very strangeness



74. BACK OF A CARVED PERSIAN MIRROR FRAME.

we were led to suspect a meaning in it; but his real opportunity came with the introduction of the suaver cursive hand (*c.* 1000), whose sweeping lines suggest, however executed, the stroke of the original pen; and he seized upon it. It is in this Neskhi character that his triumphs in decorative writing have been achieved.



75. THE WORD "ALLAH" FORMING AN ORNAMENTAL DEVICE.

There is clearly not anything like the same elasticity in Roman or Gothic lettering as in Arab, nor have we the mastery of those Eastern ornamentists over the signs and symbols with which we have to deal ; but the lesson of their work ought not to be entirely lost upon us ; and it would be interesting to see what we could do in emulation of their manner. The result would probably not meet with popular approval ; but it might be well worth the pains ; and in particular we might learn the way to hide a meaning in our



76. THE WORD "PROPHET" IN ITALICS.

ornament, and to hide it just as effectually as seemed good to us—to screen it, if need be, from all but sympathetic observation. The two experiments here given (75, 76) do not, in the least, pretend to show what is to be done in this way: they are but a beginning, an indication, merely, of the direction in which experiment might be worth making.

Something, too, is to be learnt from the severely square-cut Chinese character (77), as well as from their freer bush-writing (the two styles have analogies with the Cufic and Neskhi respectively), and from other script, which, in proportion as we do not understand a word of it, we can judge without bias as ornament.

Our Western temperament puts us at some dis-



77. THE WORD "ALLAH" AFTER THE MANNER OF A CHINESE SEAL.

advantage. We are a matter-of-fact people, and the practical view we take of lettering hinders us from making full use of it in ornament. Our attitude towards the alphabet is somewhat too respectful. If we could bring ourselves to play with letters we might easily reduce them to ornament. The first step is to believe in the possibilities of lettering: only in that faith is art possible.



78. IRON STAMP. BYZANTINE.



79. ENAMELLED BRONZE PENDANT.

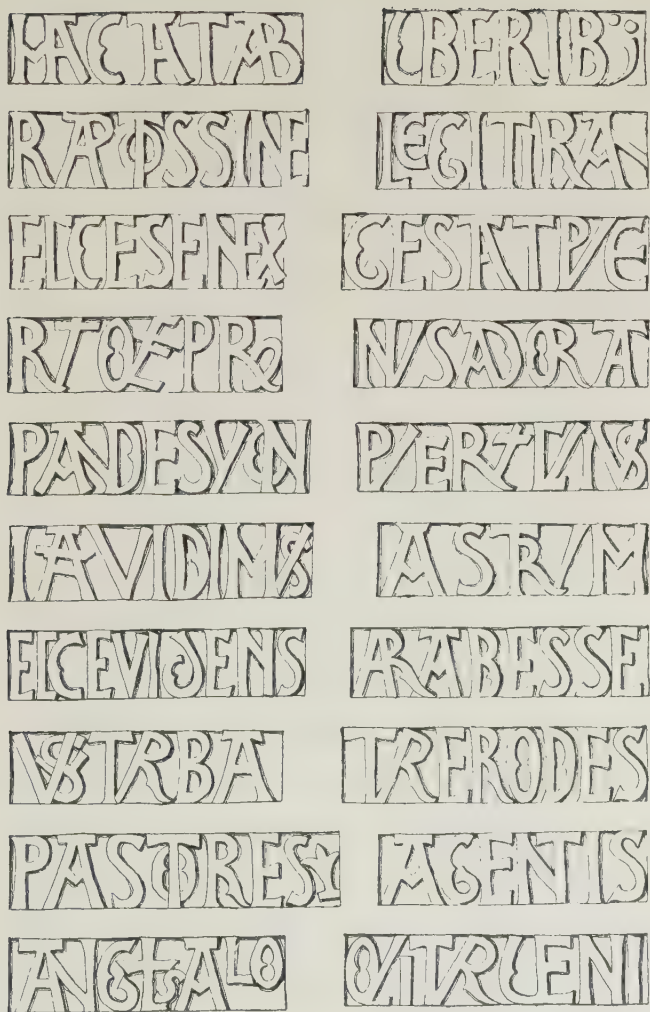
VIII. CONJOINED LETTERS

We are to a great extent debarred from the use of contractions, which, obvious as they must have been to monkish readers, to whom mediæval writing was addressed, are enough to scare a modern one from the very attempt to decipher old manuscripts abounding with them. But there is no such undeniable objection to the mere conjoining of letters in the old way.

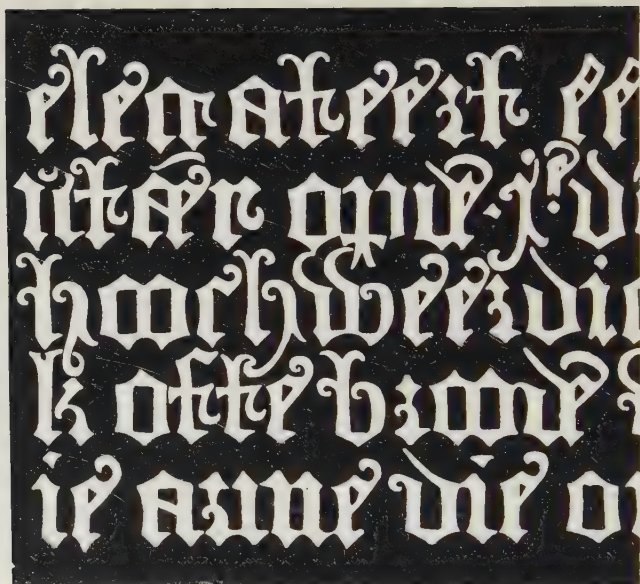
A certain amount even of complication might be excused, where the writer did not wish to be too plain, or had a right to expect the reader would anticipate the word. There are cases without number in which it is clear from the first word or two of an inscription what is to follow. It may

safely be taken for granted that the faithful will not want to read through the Creed, the Ave, or the Lord's Prayer. There is no need to spell out every word of a familiar quotation; and if there were, there it is, though not as plain as print. Any hardship the reader might suffer from the conjunction, here and there, of letters otherwise awkward to manage, would be as nothing to the convenience it would be to the designer, who, as it is, is tied by popular prejudice as never ancient writer was fettered. But there is not necessarily any confusion resulting from conjoined letters. The wording on the doors of Le Puy (80), in which it is carried to most interesting excess, is, it is true, only with difficulty to be deciphered—which may be said also of the Gothic inscription from a Flemish brass (81); but the compound letters add no little to its variety, and were presumably not difficult to read at the time they were written. It is mainly the misplaced satisfaction of the Philistine with printed type which inclines him to resent the liberties a writer is naturally tempted to take with forms the printer has stereotyped.

Time was when even printers were not averse to combined letters (accustomed as folk were to them in MS.), but the diphthong and the *ampersand* alone survive, and that mainly in the form of *&c.* This particular sign was never at the best of much artistic use—it does not range with the line for one thing—but why not simply join the letters? We have only

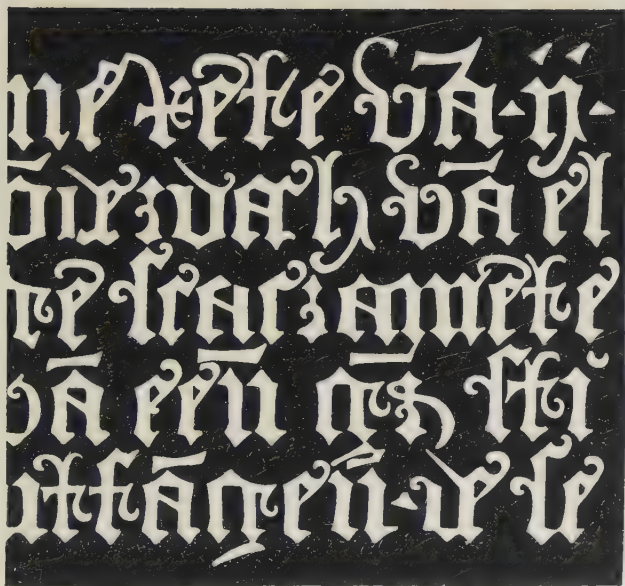


80. DETAILS FROM THE WOODEN DOORS OF LE PUY
CATHEDRAL.



81. FROM A

to let the two upright strokes of the N form on the one side part of the A, and on the other part of the D (83), and we have a perfect monogram which, moreover, acknowledges by its contraction the comparative insignificance of the word. At all events a writer is free to indulge in any such monogrammic device which does not interfere with the legibility at which he aims; whatever helps the artist in spacing his letters is to the good. There is no occasion to keep sacred the separate identity



FLEMISH BRASS.

of each particular letter; and in this particular instance, at least, there is no mistaking the letters. Again, if we may use A.D. for Anno Domini, why not make a monogram of the letters (83), or join the double N in ANNO (83)? The compound letter is not difficult to read in that connection. These and similar devices (82, 83) were all once freely in use.

It is an axiom of design that the method of workmanship employed should be not only

Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ Æ

€ € € € € €

82. DIAGRAM OF CONJOINT LETTERS.

confessed, but turned if possible to characteristic account. What though the monotony of hard and fast form is inseparable from a page set up in type? The penman, painter, carver, engraver, or other craftsman claims that he, for his part, shall be allowed to show, by deviation from the fixed forms of printed type, he has used his brains about his work; and his just claim is not invalidated by the incompetence of this scribe or the affectation of that. The word engraved within the wreath opposite, from a piece of old Roman silversmith's work (84), was probably meant to tell no more than it does.

AD AD ANNO
HEARVS GOTT

83. DIAGRAM OF CONJOINT LETTERS.

Popular prejudice against any individuality in the rendering of familiar signs comes of their very familiarity. The ideal of the unthinking is the letterpress they know so well. They forget that type is but a stiff rendering of the written character, and that it is at best a most degraded form of print they peruse in the cheap edition or the daily paper which is their standard of orthodoxy.



84. CONJOINT LETTERS. ROMAN.



85. E M S, CONTINUOUS.

IX. MONOGRAMS

The use of conjoined letters and contractions leads immediately to the design of the Monogram—which is, in fact, neither more nor less than a contraction—two or more letters writ in one.

A monogram is a compound letter, or, as its name implies, the combination in one sign (simple or complex) of two or more letters no longer separate. Whether the letters form, as in the beginning they apparently did, the first letters of a word (XP for ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ), or whether they are the initials of a man's several names, as is the more common use nowadays, does not matter, nor whether they are used as badge, symbol, or trade-mark; the point is that it is one sign conveying the significance of several letters.

In a monogram, rightly so called, there is no letter which does not form part of another (86). This is not generally understood, or we should not

HGM

CJA

ERD

ACS

EFB

ST
D

ATD

MA
W

HEV

JRC

GPM

DMR

RMD

FES

SAB

86. MONOGRAMS, BY LEWIS F. DAY.

commonly hear the interlacing of any two or three letters described as a monogram. The interlacing I.H.S., for example, whether we read the letters to signify Jesus Hominum Salvator or IHΣΟΥΣ, are not properly called the sacred monogram, nor the intertwining A and Ω, nor the initial letters of ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, except when one limb of the X forms the stroke of the P.

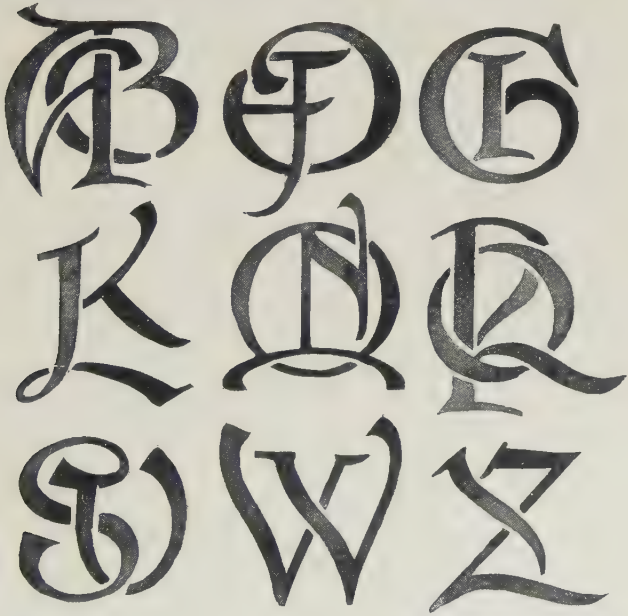
The rule that no one letter in a monogram shall be independent, but that each letter shall form part of the design of another, makes monograms no very easy pastime. Much depends upon the letters to be joined in one. It is not as if, in naming children, sponsors convenience of they provide had in mind the godchildren some of their with initials which seem bent upon maintaining entire independence.



87. OLD WEIGHT,
85 GRAINS.

Whether they are absolutely irreconcilable remains in each case to be proved. One may have spent hours in vainly trying to bring them together, and all at once they come, as it were, of their own accord. As an instance of the likelihood of happy combination, I have taken the letters of the alphabet and tried what could be done with them, three by three, as they came, at a short sitting (88). The monograms are by no means

perfect ; two or three of them do not read in the order of the letters in the alphabet ; but that is the best I could do right off, and I give the results as they came. They come well enough, I think,



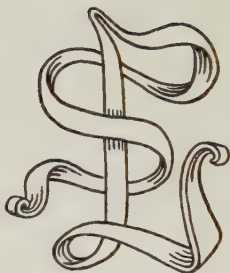
88. THE ALPHABET IN MONOGRAMS OF THREE LETTERS.

to promise a fair likelihood that letters, take them as they come, will be amenable to ingenious treatment.

If they are by no possible means to be reduced to a single sign, that may be enough reason for



89. F L, REVERSIBLE.

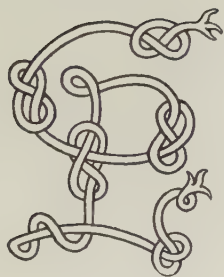


90. S P L, CONTINUOUS.

interlacing them, or tying them together, or otherwise bringing them to the condition of ornament; but the result, beautiful or otherwise, will not be a monogram, and should not be so described. It causes only confusion to call things by names to which they are not entitled.

The one case in which there can be a question as to the title of monogram is, where the letters, though in a sense independent, are continuous (85, 92). It is sometimes possible to devise a monogram in which one letter forms part of another and yet the line is continuous, and the contrivance adds interest to the design (90, 91, and 99 1); but any device drawn in one stroke might claim etymologically to be a monogram, even though one of the component letters could be removed and leave the others complete.

A reversible design, which you may turn upside down and it reads the same, is a rare possibility (89).



91. G P L, CONTINUOUS.



92. R E D, CONTINUOUS.

Though the letters of which a monogram shall be formed are prescribed to the artist, he has usually some choice as to the character of the letter he will adopt ; and the letters given him determine often the character he shall choose. He naturally adopts an alphabet which will give him the particular letters required in forms amenable to his purpose.

Comparatively simple letter-forms, but not too rigidly fixed, are the most serviceable. Letters in themselves already florid, such as the late German capitals, are by no means promising ; they are in themselves involved enough already, and quite too fanciful to be further played with.

Mr Barclay, from whose book I have, by the permission of Mr H. Soane, borrowed some beautiful specimens of design, comes to the conclusion that the earlier Gothic letters, in which curved lines abound, alone lend themselves to monogrammic use, and that the straight lines of the Roman



93. BY HOLBEIN.

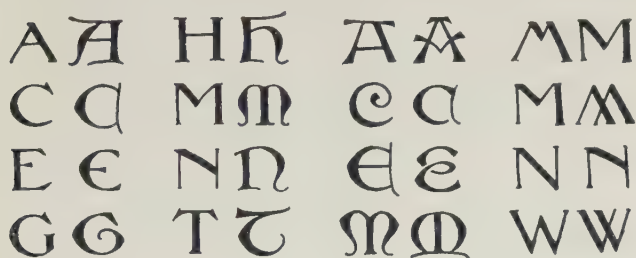


94. BY HOLBEIN.

character render it unfit. It is quite true that Lombardic capitals, for example, are exceptionally amenable, all the more so as their shapes are not so definitely fixed as the Roman, and one may with less offence take liberty with them; but, though there is something final about the form of Roman lettering, and its lines are straight and rigid—Holbein himself could not always bend it to his purpose (93, 94)—it is by no means always unmanageable, and when it does lend itself to the combination desired, the resultant monogram has a sort of dignity all its own. It is a great convenience to have two or more forms of a single letter to choose from. The rounded form may offer possibilities which the angular does not, and *vice versâ*. It is not, by the way, always a question of Roman or Gothic character, as may be seen in the diagram opposite (95). There is scope for choice within the range of either Roman or Gothic.

Absolute symmetry is not essential to satisfactory design, but there must be in it a sense

of balance ; and in pursuit of it the designer is tempted, not merely to tamper with the shapes of letters, but to place them out of their order. It is better that the natural sequence of the letters should be at once apparent in the monogram ; but in any case it should not be so flagrantly violated as to compel one to read them awrong. So also with regard to the value of the letters, their relative importance should be maintained. In the letters



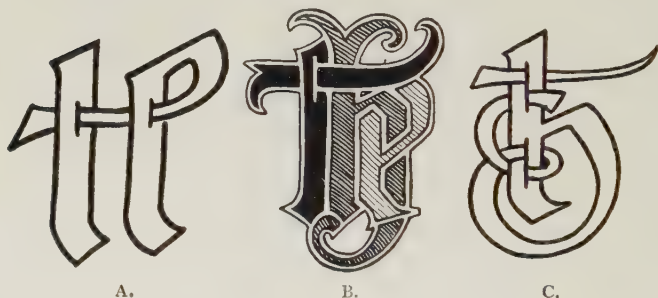
95. DIAGRAM INDICATIVE OF VARIETY IN AVAILABLE
LETTER-SHAPES.

of a single name the initial would naturally dominate. In the case of initials it might be desirable to insist either upon the Christian or the surname, or to pronounce the two equally, or to relegate to insignificance the second of two Christian names habitually dropped.

Only for some good reason should the letters of a monogram differ widely in size. They need not be all of a size, but there should be no appearance of any difference in scale. This is the more

important where the part of one letter forms in itself another complete letter. The letter P is contained, of course, within the B or R, the F within the E, but in neither case will the one letter do duty for a monogram of the two—if it is meant to be read.

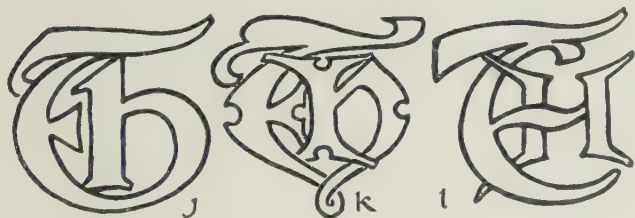
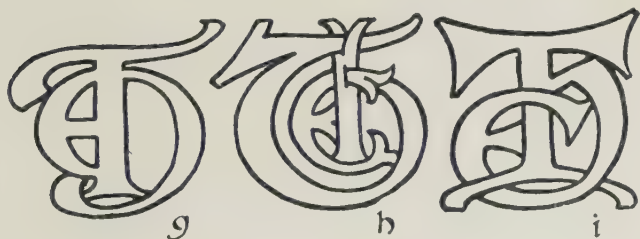
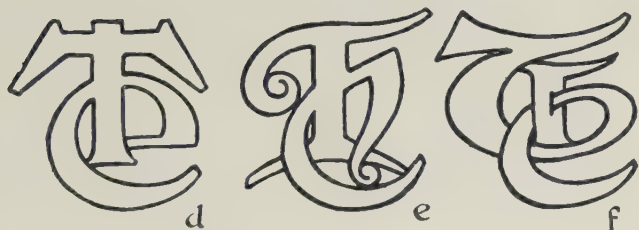
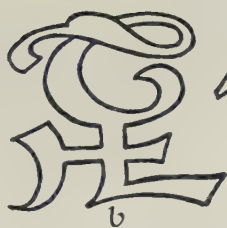
Not only should letters read in their order, but they should read from the same point of view:



96. MONOGRAMS AND CYPHER, T H E.

only in the case of a monogram decorating something as likely to be seen from one point of view as another, is it excusable to place them at various angles of inclination.

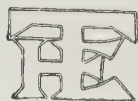
There is an obvious and soon-reached limit to the number of letters which can be combined in a satisfactory monogram. It is only when you know they are there that you can read in the device which forms the tailpiece to this chapter the letters ELIZABETH R.



97. MONOGRAMS, T. H. E.

In order to illustrate in a practical way some of the points above discussed, I have taken the letters of the word THE and made monograms of them (96, 97, 98, 99). It will be seen that they lend themselves to a variety of combinations, some of which read in the order of the word, and others do not—though these last were really written in the right order. In most the T is made to take its due prominence; occasionally it is a capital followed by minuscules. Those of them which read in the order T E H are, in so far, unsatisfactory. In two instances (*h* 97 and *C* 99) it is only by a slightly fanciful treatment of the termination of the E that the letters are completely made out. The kind of balance observed in *h* 97 is a thing to aim at in monogram design. Of the minuscule versions (96) A is readable only if we accept a disconsonant H; B is not a monogram at all; and C reads E T H.

Supposing the letters T H E stood for the initials of a man's name, it would be desirable to give importance to the E of the surname, and the H

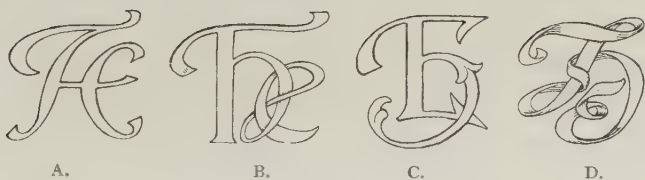


98. MONOGRAMS, T H E.

might possibly, as only the second Christian name, take quite a back place in the design. The

point is that the letters should retain as nearly as possible their actual value.

Another condition which enters into the design



99. MONOGRAMS, T H E.

of a monogram is, the space it has to fill, or, failing that, the shape it will give. A given space to occupy may put out of the question an otherwise possible composition. A given arrangement of letters may compel a circular, upright, squat, or irregular shape, as the case may be.

A cartouche or other shape enclosing a monogram (85, 100) may help to bring the composition together, but is no part of the monogram. A monogram if well designed should stand alone. To fall back upon the frame for help is, in a measure, to confess yourself beaten; but if the frame exists to begin with, then you have a right to rely upon its lines; in fact, it is one of the conditions to which you have to conform.

Another confession of weakness is to resort, in the design of a monogram as such (and not as an ornamental device for some particular decorative purpose), to ultra-fantastic treatment of the letter-forms, and a yet more abject one is the introduction of independent ornament. There would be less occasion for any such makeshifts, were we not possessed by a demon of symmetry. We

forget that it is not equal-sidedness but balance that is essential; and that there is a compensating charm in character.

This is not to say there may not be good reason for devices in which for some symbolic or other sufficient purpose an emblem is included. The excuse is the more sufficient when the symbolism (as in the case of the rays in 101, which hold the stencil plate together) fulfils some practical purpose.

The component parts of a monogram should be coherent, consequent, and quite clearly belonging to the letters they unite to represent; but the designer need have no compunction in departing widely from the normal proportion and symmetry observable in the separate letters. The consideration is now the shapeliness of the monogram, not of the individual letters of which it is made up. The letters may be of the artist's own designing; he is bound to no alphabet: but they



100. L F D, WITH
BORDER, STENCILLED.



101. L F D, WITH BACK-
GROUND DEVICE, STENCILLED.

must be all of one handwriting. The incongruous association of Roman and Gothic letters, florid and simple, is intolerable in proportion as the diverse characters are pronounced. And, except in the unusual case of a monogram designed to be seen from all sides, the letters should have one and the same inclination, upright or slanting. Crossed letters seldom come well.

As to precisely what degree of liberty the designer may take with the alphabet it would be futile to lay down any law; to some extent he must be governed by the circumstances of each given case; for the rest he owes obedience only to his own artistic sense. The common case of the designer who is more intent on disguising the lines of his monogram with flourishes than compelling them into the way of beauty, is hopeless. Elaborately



102.

W T, STENCILLED.

ornamental letters raise at once a suspicion as to the designer's competence. On the other hand, there is in simple, straightforward lettering a distinction and character which make amends for some lack of obvious grace.

It is not enough that the letters should be all there: it should be possible to decipher them. Monograms have been ere now designed (103)

in every respect admirable, except that one could no more be expected to read them than to unriddle one of those unimpeachable conundrums devised with the deliberate intention that it shall not possibly be guessed. There are occasions when the object of a monogram is disguise, when the problem is to invent a symbol which shall tell nothing to those who have not the key to its meaning. In the ordinary way the meaning is meant to be unravelled by whosoever cares to give it a thought. It should form at first sight a good pattern; on further examination it should be readable, and only difficult to read in proportion as it is meant to be enigmatical.



103. FROM A COIN OF
QUEEN ELIZABETH.



104. REVERSED CYPHER, FRENCH WOOD-CARVING.

X. CYPHERS

Even if it were within the scope of design to make any given letters into a monogram, the only possible one would many a time be ugly. In such case an artist naturally discards the idea and falls back upon cypher: he may indeed in any case prefer that device as the more appropriate to his ornamental purpose; at all events it is never the forlorn hope which a monogram may be.

A cypher differs from a monogram in that it is not a contraction, not a separate sign compounded of several letters, but a commingling or interlacing of signs, each of which is in itself a perfect and independent letter, the one as it were planted in

front of the other, or, more commonly, entangled with it. Letters thus interlocked are commonly accepted as monograms; but, though they pass current, they are not coin of the realm. For the rest, however, the rules which govern the composition of the cypher are very much the same as those to which the monogram is subject.

Lettering of all kinds lends itself to this device of cunning interlacing, but none perhaps so readily as cursive writing, the flowing forms of which were so commonly employed by the designers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to whom the straight line, ever-recurrent in the upright Roman letter, was abhorrent. So entirely did they adopt this one slanting form of letter, that it is sometimes assumed that the term cypher applies only to letters of the cursive type; but this is not so. It is further fallaciously assumed that a cypher must be absolutely symmetrical. There was once a generation of artists who apparently determined



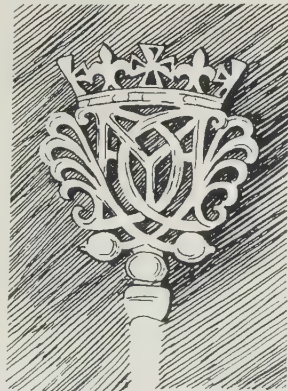
105. GLASS QUARRIES WITH MONOGRAM AND CYPHERS.



106. KEY-BOW WITH
REVERSED CYPHER.

to have symmetry, at no matter what price of intricate convolution; but the essential is not symmetric but ornamental form. Enough that the lines make good pattern. The striving after absolute symmetry resulted in designs, graceful indeed, but all very much of one pattern, and that often a rather effeminate one.

It was the insatiate desire for symmetry which led to the practice, at one time almost invariable in cyphers in which the flowing line prevails, of *reversing* the letter; though the sloping form of the writing was in itself a temptation (given the ideal of symmetry) to avoid the difficulty of design by simply turning the device over, or turning over so much of it as was needful to symmetry. The result was at times rather poverty-stricken (106), at times rich but obscure beyond elucidation (104). In reality the



107. KEY-BOW WITH
REVERSED CYPHER.

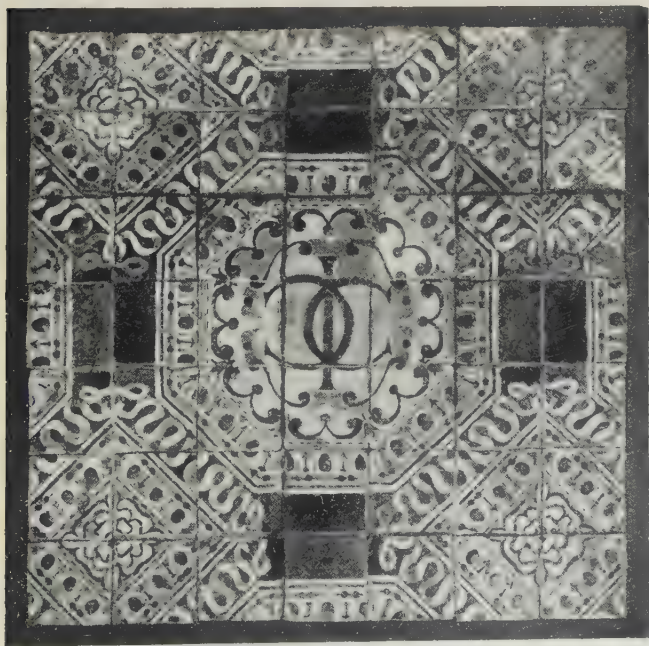


108. WROUGHT-IRON CYPHER, REVERSED.

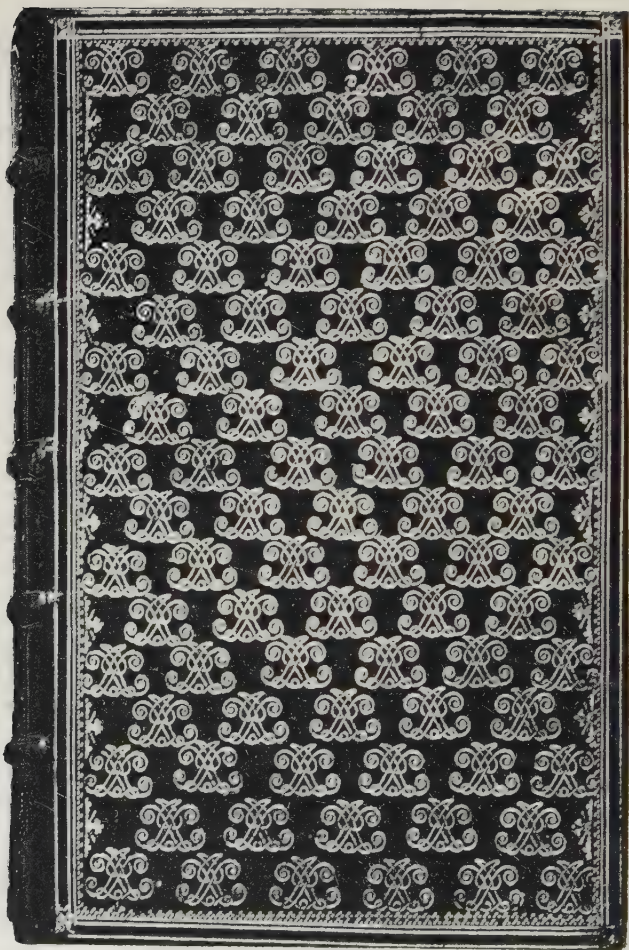
necessity for reversal was never very great, seeing that designers were not hampered by any thought of keeping strictly to the letter, but indulged quite freely in wreathing lines of ornamental scrollwork only in so far part of the lettering that they grew out of it. An inventive mind might

readily by means of such extraneous ornament have made good the balance of design, and so avoided all occasion for reversing letters; but the real truth is, that letters sloping all one way do not naturally lend themselves to symmetric design.

The confusion which comes of overturning letters is worse confounded by the fact that one letter reversed may in combination with the



109. PAINTED TILES, WITH CYPHER, O I C.



110. BOOKBINDING TOOLED WITH CYPHER DIAPER J L
REVERSED.

lines of another letter give a third which is perhaps not needed. The letter E in the wrought-iron cypher illustrated (108) might be the accidental result of inverting the B, or *vice versâ*.

A difficulty with which the designer has to contend is that (say) of three letters, two perhaps



III. CYPHERS, NOT REVERSED, CARVED.

unite as it were inevitably into a single sign, whereas the other refuses obstinately to give up its independence. The result is, properly speaking, neither a monogram nor a cypher, but something between the two, and, by reason of its indeterminateness, not quite satisfactory, though perhaps the best possible under the circumstances.



112. CYPHER, T G.

For my own part I prefer, as a rule, either a monogram or a cypher to any compromise between the two; but it is in every case the result which justifies the method or fails to do so. There is this objection to the hybrid form of design, that, according as it is the monogrammatic sign or the separate letter which first catches your attention, you expect either a monogram or a cypher, and are likely therefore to be puzzled by

the combination of the two.

Except where the idea was to confound us, the fault of confusion is difficult to condone. It can hardly be said that, where a certain degree of mystery is sought, it is not permissible to reverse; but the artist who relies upon reversing lays himself open to the suspicion that, if the task of straightforward design is not beyond him, he is disposed to shirk it. Occasionally, however, a letter is turned over to such admirable purpose that one is bound to confess that the artist adopted this treatment for the unanswerable



113. CYPHER, P G.

reason that it is the best that could possibly be done with given letters. That is so in the case, for instance, of the familiar combination of **Q H D** in the monogram of Henri Deux and Diane, which, frequently as it occurs in work done for the king or his mistress, seems

never to come amiss. It has a dignity which the sloping italics of later date never reach; and it is difficult to imagine how it could be bettered.



115. CYPHER, B E.

Again, in the **Q I C** in painted tilework of the same period (109) it will be seen that the beautiful severity of the letters, their proportion, and the simplicity of their composition, give an air of distinction to a cypher which, less perfectly proportioned, might have been mean or commonplace. Ornamental devices of this kind are so readily resolvable into their elements that there is no possibility of the confusion always likely to occur when intricately interlacing forms are reversed.

For a similar reason one has



114. CYPHER, G R S.



116. CYPHER, W S.

nothing to say against the reversal of a single letter, the double C, for example, of Charles VIII. and of our own Charles II. If the artist can make a satisfactory badge or ornamental device out of a letter, he is within his province: the condition is that he shall make ornament of it. Even for more fanciful reversing, the excuse of ornament holds good. As a cypher of the letters J L, the device on page 136 (110) is very much like other interlacings of the period: as an ornamental diaper, it makes most excellent decoration in tooling.

The determination to abstain from turning letters over results in a form of severity (111) of which lovers of symmetry do not approve.

Bookbinders made admirable use of the simple initial as a repeat, with or without a surmounting crown, in binding books for royal patrons such as Louis XIII. Before that the crowned F of François I^{er} figured prominently in the details of his châteaux. As for the H of Henri II., it was used in such a plain and simple way that one almost wonders how it is that it does not look bald. It forms, however, perfectly adequate decoration, owing to the extremely judicious way in which it was everywhere introduced.

In the fine ceiling of the Salle de Diane, at Fontainebleau (170), both the simple H of Henri and the monogram CI H D are used in a quite masterly way. One is apt to associate the idea of



117 CYPHERS, A M, I H S, A Ω.

monograms and cyphers with something small or finicking; but the breadth and dignity of decoration such as that is unsurpassed.

Enough, however, about reversing; let us return to the cypher. The interlacing of separate letters does not hinder them from being each of a different colour (*b* 96), by aid of which colour (or in the



118. CYPHER, I H C.

case of carving it might be texture) letters most intricately interwoven may be traced and easily identified. By the same means any one letter may be emphasised at will. Thanks, therefore, to colour, or to texture, the artist is enabled safely to venture upon combinations of letters which, apart from it, would be inextricably involved. Of the Gothic minuscule cyphers on page 138 the

one (113) would be difficult, the other (112) impossible, to read but for such help. An artist, however, who really enjoys lettering prefers to do without it if he can.

The occasion for minuscule letters does not very



119. CUTWORK CYPHER, A M.

often occur in cypher or monogram design; we appear to have made up our minds in favour of capitals—though a foreigner does not seem to see the objection which we have to beginning his signature with a small letter. In the case of letters which spell a name, we might well combine the initial majuscule with minuscules.

The protest that a cypher is not a monogram, must not be taken to imply any under-valuation of the cypher. The designer naturally prefers to make a monogram—possibly because it is the more difficult thing to do—but the cypher gives him opportunities of ornament which that does not; and some of the most beautiful and completely satisfactory letter-combinations are not monograms but cyphers. The designs of Mr Montague (114, 116) are admirable, and that of Harry Rogers on the same page (115) is a triumph of ingenuity. Think again of the many beautiful interlacings of the letters A M, I H S, A Ω (117, 119) in Christian art. The letters I H C on page 142 (118) branch out, it will be seen, very freely into foliage without which the letters would be complete. As a cypher the design is in so far open to reproach; but, as a panel of ornament, to which the meaning of the letters adds interest, the treatment fully justifies itself. The severer foliation of the A M (119) stands still less in need of excuse.

In forming cyphers of the letters T H E (120), which it may be interesting to compare with the monograms in the last chapter, I have confined myself to a Gothic character more or less florid, and have adapted the designs uniformly to a given space which they are easily made to fill; but out of the six which occurred to me at the time of designing, one at least reads T E H, which in a monogram of the letters T H E is a distinct fault.



120. CYPHERS OF THE LETTERS T H E.

The tailpiece below is not so much a cypher as a symbolic device in which a cypher is included—that being of course quite a right thing to do, though it is not precisely cypher design.

It is one thing to design a monogram, it is another to design it for a specific place or purpose, or to include it in some scheme of decoration. Here as elsewhere there are few things the artist, for all that may be said to the contrary, dare not do with lettering, provided only he is competent, and that he cares for lettering. If he loves it, he may safely be trusted with it.



121. DEVICE INCLUDING
CYPHER AND MASONIC
SYMBOL.



122. ITALIAN LETTERING, 1439.

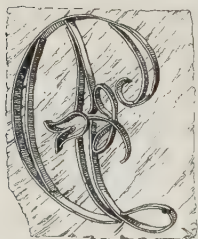
XI. ORNAMENTAL LETTERING

The form of an artist's lettering is seldom entirely under his control. In departing from accepted shapes he runs the risk of not being read. So long as he desires to be read, he is free only within the limits of legibility—a quality it is for his readers to determine. He must be not only legible, but legible to them. Learning itself is therefore no safe shelter against misunderstanding. The adoption of an obsolete character will be reckoned to a man as at the best pedantry, just as the invention of quite new forms will be put down to his conceit or affectation.

The wise policy for an artist (not that it is wise always to act on policy) is to keep safe hold of some time-honoured and familiar form of letter, and to deal with it gently, venturing only upon such departures from it as in artistic conscience he feels bound to make. This applies to all manner of inscriptions

whose plain business it is to enlighten us, and that without great tax upon our attention.

Deviation from accepted forms, prompted by the artistic conscience, may be in one or more of several directions. The designer is open to suggestions arising out of his scheme of decoration, out of the nature of the inscription, out of the position it is to occupy, out of the material in which and the



123. STAMP. THE
LETTER IN METAL
TAPE ON ROUGH
DEAL.

implement with which it is to be written ; and, apart from deliberate decorative purpose, and no matter what the general character of the lettering he may adopt (that may be determined for him by architectural and other considerations) the implement and method employed in rendering it will affect his rendering, removing the lettering somewhat from the original type,

and giving it a character more or less of its own. We do not want telling whether lettering was written with a pen, or painted with a brush ; indented with a point in something soft, or cut with a chisel out of something hard ; we see at once that it was cut in wood, or stone, or metal, and whether it was incised or grounded out. The inevitable character of its execution is seen even in work which is meant to be graphic and no more, and it is seen to be so much to the good as art.

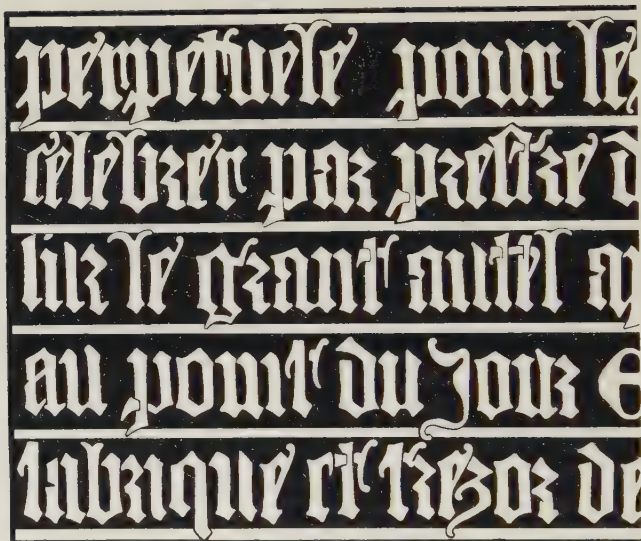


124. WOODCUT INITIALS. GERMAN.

This the artist ornamentally inclined naturally develops in the direction of ornament; and so arrives, almost by accident, certainly without any very deliberate intention on his part, at something like ornamental lettering. When it comes to the design of lettering in which plain reading is not the first consideration, he is in ornamental duty bound to develop it to the full. Over-elaboration is a fault into which the ornamentist is prone to fall; but so long as he confines himself to the evolution of that character which comes of his material or of the way he is working it, he is on tolerably safe ground. Out of the conditions



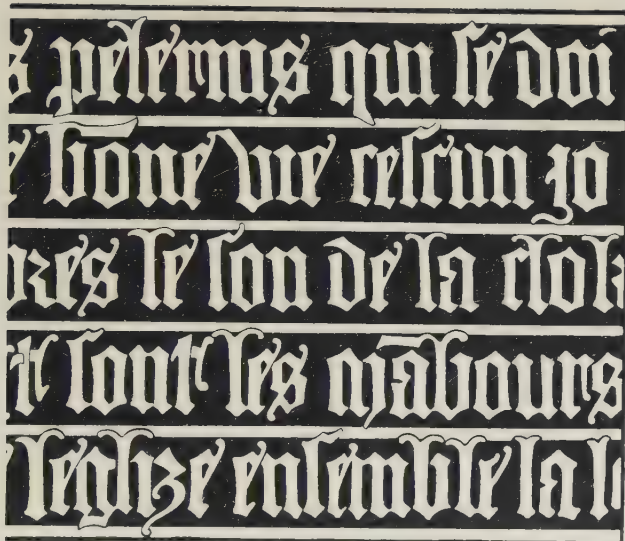
125. COPPER ENGRAVING.



126. PART OF A FLEMISH BRASS

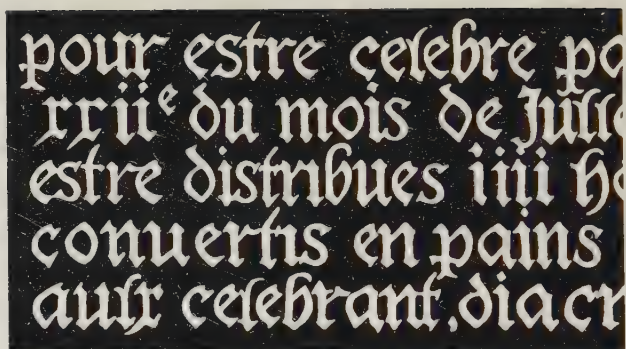
under which he is working and his own personal bias, unstimulated by any fervid desire to be original, beautiful and ever fresh variations on the alphabet arise.

The influence which the way of working exercises upon design is very plainly seen on page 148, in the illustration representing a rude block for printing on linen an initial D, afterwards presumably to be embroidered. The process of its making is simple: into a chunk of deal, roughly sawn across the grain, strips of flat metal tape are driven.



GROUNDED OUT.

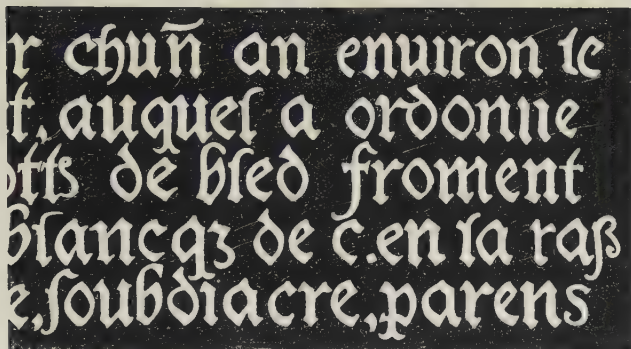
This naturally suggests sweeping lines and forms that can easily be bent into shape. Hence the type of letter, and hence the character of the added decoration. The workman, like his public—the thing was made for French peasant use, and sold by a peasant in the market-place—would very possibly have liked to make the sprig of foliage more natural; but the wire would have it so. More, perhaps, from reasons of economy than from any promptings of taste or preference for severity, he followed its prompt-



127. PART OF A FLEMISH SLAB

ings, and, almost in spite of himself, gave it character.

The rudeness of the work enables us in this instance the better to see how design is influenced by the conditions under which work is done. But similar influences may be seen at work in the letters engraved upon Greek coins, which look sometimes (48) almost as if the die-sinker had set about elaborating the Greek character, so curiously are the letters rounded at the points. Very little consideration shows us, however, that he had no such fantastic idea. It simply happened in that way. There was always a danger, in cutting short sharp lines with no matter what implement, of overshooting the mark. A safeguard was, first to drill holes at the points where the lines met or ended, and then engrave the lines from hole to

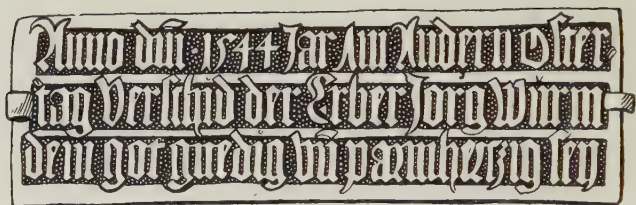


r chuñ an enuiron le
t, auques a ordonne
otts de bled froment
blancqz de c. en la rass
e, soubdiaire, parens

CUT IN STONE OR SLATE.

hole. That is what he did—with the result that the drill marks, not being effaced, assert themselves sufficiently to give a quite peculiar character to the writing. In the case of the coins, of course, the strokes end in little pearls. A precisely similar device is adopted in a Greek inscription on a bronze tablet in the museum at Naples, where the engraver has evidently begun by boring holes at the points where the lines of his letters are to end, omitting, however, to do so where, as in the case of the bar of an A, the grooved lines already cut were all the help he wanted—thus clearly showing the practical purpose of the little cells at the ends of the longer strokes.

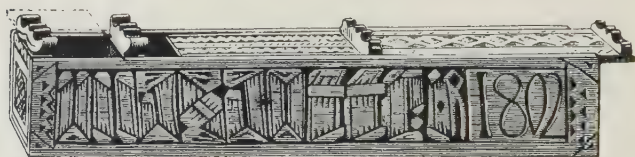
Penmanship is writ large upon the initials of the Gothic scribes and in many of the engraved initials founded upon penwork (124). The



128. BRONZE GRAVE TABLET. NÜREMBERG.

flourishes of the late German capitals inevitably suggest the writing master. Letters of the same type engraved on copper (125) have a perceptibly different flavour. Again, the flourishes into which the Gothic letters painted on majolica and Hispano-Moresque pottery go off, are traces no longer of the pen but of the brush. You may set out to do with the brush what was first done with the pen; but you end in doing it rather differently.

One feels also that the letters in the sign of Don Alfonso (19) owe something of their character to the fact that they are penned in outline and the background filled in solid; and that those in the Flemish and German brasses (126, 128) are influenced by the fact that they are grounded



129. ICELANDIC MATCHBOX.



130. FRETTED IVORY PLAQUES. PORTUGUESE.

out. Letters of about the same period cut in stone (127) have quite a different look. So also the white letter upon a black ground, with its background of thin foliage, etc., in certain wood-cut initials (148, etc.) is plainly not altogether unaffected by the fact that the white parts represent the cutting away of the wood. In like manner the square-cut characters on the Icelandic match-box (129) remind one of the knife with which they were cut; and one can see, in the rendering of Lombardic capitals in Gothic glass painting (52), that they were scratched with a point out of a layer of pigment on the glass. The letters A U D E O, S P E R O (130) have a certain Portuguese character, but the character of fretwork is more emphatically marked in them than that of nationality; and the cyphers which form so frequent a feature upon old key-bows (106, 107) are, as it were, translated into pierced and engraved metal. The name on the Italian comb-case (131) tells, not only that it belonged to a de Boen, but that it was chased on leather.



131. CUT LEATHER. ITALIAN.

In event of an artist not duly observing the character proper to material, it has a way of retaliating. The inscription, for example, on the beautiful French lock opposite (132) is too much of a *tour de force* in piercing; the letters are over frail for chiselled iron, with the result that the inscription is in a lamentably ruinous condition. The iron has here its obvious revenge upon the designer.

Character, then, that it may be ornamental character, comes of allowing material and the way it is worked to have a hand in shaping it, and the ornamentist is not merely safe in following the lead thus given to his invention, but foolhardy in not following it. Further, his own personality, presuming him to have one, will find expression in his rendering of no matter what alphabet by no matter what method—it will be just as much his handwriting as though he had written it with a fountain pen upon a sheet of cream-laid note. Furthermore, the exigencies of composition will



132. GOTHIC IRON LOCK-PLATE.

suggest innumerable modifications of the letters as they appear in the copy-book, and an artist were no artist if he did not venture upon them. It would be absurd for a designer not to prolong the tail of a

letter if he wanted it to fill a space, or otherwise to assert the rights of art, as explained above in reference to handwriting. In the word STENCILLING (133), the heads of C and G and the tails of E and L are lengthened with a view, not only to artistic effect, but to the strengthening of the stencil plate.

It is when artistic devices make clearly for workmanlikeness, and workmanlike expedients for artistic effect, that the design of lettering (as of all ornament) proves thoroughly satisfactory.

There is, however, scope for ornamental lettering beyond this. The designer is, in strict justice, at liberty in many cases deliberately to make his letter-shapes ornamental; though the right is in these days of matter-of-fact so grudgingly allowed to the artist that it might almost as well be denied him. The wider tolerance in this respect in days before type-printing led to the devising of delightful lettering (122).

There are two ways of designing ornamental lettering. The one is to compel the letters into the shape of ornament. This was the idea of the Byzantine and other primitive illuminators. But as early as the sixth or seventh centuries writers began to be diverted from the path of ornament pure and simple by the unnatural—or is it only too natural?—delight in torturing the forms of birds, beasts, fishes, and imaginary monsters into something which might do duty for lettering. The



133. STENCIL PLATE.

most beautiful of the interlacing initials in Irish and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries are not those which break out incontinently into heads and legs, in the wild endeavour to persuade one that this ingenious strapwork is something more than ornament. Such effort ends at times in being something less. Still the men were bent upon making the beasts or monsters of their imagination into letters. The creatures formed the letter and were not added to it.

So it was with early Gothic lettering, and, in fact, with all writing until the days of letterpress. Not till then did letter-forms become fixed. Working with his own hand, the man was free, not merely to follow his temperament, but to give way to his mood, so that in the work of even the steadiest-going writer there was a chance always of freshness and a possibility of something new. And the scribe, being in the habit of dealing freely with letter-forms, found less difficulty in playing

ornamental pranks with them, in making, if need were, letters which were unmistakably ornamental, ornament which was unmistakably lettering.

With the advent of printing, and the inevitably fixed type of the founder, a blight of uniformity spread from the printer to the scribe: the ideal of freedom declined; but, so long as the Gothic spirit lingered, designers would still at times sport with the shape of a letter. What a variety of shapes a single letter takes (134) in even printed initials of the days when printing was yet young!

In the case of handwriting the artist was controlled only by his own taste, which, until the time when late German penmanship went off into an hysteria of incoherent flourishes, seldom failed him: there is, we may say, no standard type of Lombardic lettering; but, with all its variety of proportion and shape, it seldom goes far astray from fitness or beauty. This applies to the main outline of the letter. Lombardic and Gothic capitals generally allowed of very considerable variation in the parts of the letter, in the thickening of the curved lines, in the curving of the relatively straight—all of which made for ornament. The next step in that direction was to play with the lines of contour, to fret the outline as it were, and slightly to foliate it, but at first only so slightly as barely to interfere with it. At junctures, too, where two lines met (134), a loop was often substituted for the point, and

this loop developed at times into a very effective ornamental feature. It had been, it will be remembered, from the time of the Celtic scribes, a practice to elaborate the letter by interlacing,



134. VARIETIES OF THE LETTER A FROM EARLY PRINTED BOOKS.

and some of the most charming letters of the sixteenth century depend upon interlacing for their ornament (143, 144).

The slight foliation of the terminations of the letters develops finally into free, and it may be florid, growth, which, according to its degree and



135. LETTERS GROWING INTO ORNAMENT.

kind, may be considered either as part of the letter, or as ornament associated with it (62, 135); it is often difficult to say which.

The other way of designing ornamental letters might be regarded as a carrying further of the idea of foliation; but it carries it so far that it enters a new province. It amounts in the end to clothing the letter with ornament, or compelling ornament, more or less, into the shape of a letter. Even the human figure has been tortured in this way (136); but it has never yet been made into satisfactory lettering, though artists of ability have tried their hands at it.

A singularly beautiful specimen of florid foliated lettering is the name-plate of Israel van Meckenen (66), to which more detailed reference is made on page 97.

In the initials by Cranach (155) the scrollery compelled into letter-form begins to be incoherent; one feels the want of a simple outline; and yet more so in those of Matthias Gereon (167). The simpler A of the François I^{er} period (137) makes more sober ornament, but has also

too much the effect of having been put together. The ebullition of ornament out of the slender lines of the italics in illustration 104 is rather sudden, but it is directed by a sense of grace. In the letters of the word REGINA on the Prayer-book of Mary Tudor (138), the ornament is in part very obviously added to the letter; it is as if the goldsmith had first made his letters and then belted them. Such added ornament has generally the appearance of an excrescence; here it is judiciously employed, and results, for once, in adequate decoration.



136. GROTESQUE WOODCUT. 1464.

The abuse of ornamental lettering is patent to every one. Marvels of ugliness have been perpetrated in its name. So little is lettering esteemed among us nowadays that it is usually left to the incompetent hands of draughtsmen, who look upon

ornament as a convenient means of disguising faults of penmanship or draughtsmanship.

As to the use of ornamental lettering, there is



137. FRENCH WOOD CARVING. FRANÇOIS I^{ER}.

plenty of room for divergence of opinion; but, admitting that in serious inscription ornament may be for the most part out of place, it has its place in lettering, and a very useful one. The artist's calling is not of such a grave and lofty



138. PRAYER-BOOK OF QUEEN MARY.

nature that he may never descend from the heights of academic design and indulge in the frivolity of ornament—if so it be considered. The potter plays with his brush, the needlewoman with her thread ; to the worker work becomes play ; and his playfulness touches, if only because it is a sure sign of enjoyment in the work, a sympathetic chord in us, and wins our approbation.



139. FRIVOLITY IN
LETTERING.

XII. INITIAL LETTERS

To many the idea of Lettering in Ornament will suggest at once the thought of Initial Letters, for the most part, though not necessarily, distinguished by ornament—their essential peculiarity being that they do distinguish themselves, in whatever way, from the surrounding text.

It is in books, manuscript or printed, that initials are most useful. There is less occasion for them in mural and decorative inscriptions, where even distinctive capitals are not always necessary. In fact, with the one exception of black-letter, inscriptions are happiest all in capitals. The minuscule was not adopted for architectural or monumental purposes until a period when design was fast losing its dignity: it belongs to parchment and paper; and with it are associated the capital and the initial.

The ostensible purpose of an initial letter, it is a truism to say, is to mark a beginning, the point at which the reader is to begin, or to begin anew. The term "versal" is only another name for what is practically the same thing, the letter, namely, to which the officiating priest shall turn. The

decoration of this letter is by way of signal or reminder.

The initial heads the chapter as the capital heads the sentence. It is writ large and beautiful by way of emphasis, more or less ; and by strict rights the letter should be glorified in proportion to the importance of its position. Logically, as well as artistically speaking, there is no reason why several series of initials should not be used, with varying emphasis, upon a single page ; but it would not seem to the printer worth his while, and it would sorely tax the judgment of the compositor.

An initial, however, is not emphatic according merely to its size. In common speech a word is more effectually emphasised by a pause before its utterance than by shouting it. And the notion of pause explains and justifies a certain disregard of immediate legibility in the initial. There, if anywhere, the artist may give loose to his fancy. Ornament which elsewhere might be distracting is here attractive, literally of use, that is to say, in calling attention to the letter (140). A pause before the reader begins or resumes his parable is not without dramatic effect, and a letter must be indeed entangled with ornament if during that respite it has not plainly distinguished itself.

There are occasions, again, where it may be taken for granted that the reader expects a certain letter, in which case there is no need to



140. INITIALS BY ISRAEL VAN MECKENEN. 1489.

make it easy to read. On the other hand, where easy reading is essential, as for example in an advertisement, an initial not over-involved in ornament may, by its detachment from the text, confuse the reader—as in the case of a placard in which the word ELECTION caught the eye; it turned out to refer to a *S election* of popular songs, but the initial S was so far removed from the word to which it belonged that the eye was satisfied without it. Where (as in this instance) the letters following the initial make of themselves a word, it is all the more necessary to bring them close up to it, that no such error may be possible.

The illuminator has it all his own way with regard to initials (141). He is a sort of free lance in the field of caligraphy, not bound to keep closely within the ranks which a draughtsman subject to the conditions of printing must observe. Not in the matter of colour only, but of form also, he has a scope denied to the wood engraver. It lies within his discretion to enrich initials with ornament, to glorify them with gold and colour, to encroach at pleasure upon the written text, which he can accommodate to his wildest lines. But his discretion is not seldom at fault. His very freedom is a temptation, to which, at the bidding of his pen (always ready to run away with his judgment), he has from first to last been apt to yield, giving us, perhaps, beautiful initials which are far from resulting in a beautiful page—to the



141. FROM AN ILLUMINATED CHOIR BOOK AT SIENA.

making of which there goes a dignity inseparable from reticence and self-control.

The air of wild gesticulation so characteristic of a certain class of illuminated initials is enough of itself to convict them of extravagance. They presume, too, on the mere grounds that they are put in by hand, to sprawl over the page as though it were theirs. It is all of a piece with the inclination of the illuminator to look upon the margin of a book as a fair field for his exploits. It is not to be wondered at if, in the scarcity of parchment and paper, the mediæval artist seized upon the margins of the books which came within his grasp. His excuse will serve us, however, no longer. Let us have initials, by all means, and borders too, for that matter, but let them be

planned to fall within the margin, which is the fitting and the necessary frame alike for type and manuscript. Encroachment upon the margin is less pardonable than ever in print, where it has the appearance of being an afterthought—which it is not.



142. WOODCUT INITIALS. FRENCH.

XIII. ORNAMENTAL INITIALS

An initial is distinguished from the text by its size always, often by its colour. Even where in mediæval books the letter itself is not in all the colours of the illuminator's palette, it is commonly in vermillion or ultramarine, or set in a filigree of ornament in one or other of those colours.

It was from the first a foregone conclusion that initials should be ornamental. In the beginning the ornament was in the letter itself, not merely associated with it in the form of accompaniment or background (142). The scribe designed it more or less anew, took liberties with it, modified its shape in the direction of ornament, made pattern of it, played with it (143, 144), and was not content merely to play about it, as became eventually the custom of draughtsmen more interested in picture than in design.

Printers' initials hardly ever depended for decorative interest upon the letter only, however ornamentally rendered. It was not enough for them that the shape of it was ornamental, there must needs be ornament or foliage also, interlacing with it, or forming, it might be, a rich background to the letter (143, 144). Eventually, with the Renaissance, when letter shapes became more definitely fixed, ornament was confined entirely to the background (145).



143. WOODCUT INITIALS. FRENCH.

Colour is, of course, the exception in printed books. But even in black and white one gets as nearly as possible its equivalent by means of ornament which, according to its density, tells lighter than a solid black letter or darker than a letter merely in outline, and gives a patch of comparatively solid print, calculated to call more peremptory attention to it than a naked letter of the same proportions would do.

This froth of ornament about a letter may be regarded as a sort of danger signal, no more to



144. WOODCUT INITIALS. FRENCH.

be mistaken than the foam about a rock not otherwise clearly distinguishable. A haze of ornament, on the other hand, in which the letter is lost to view, is in itself a danger.

Still, in the case of a letter big and heavy enough to hold its own, a tint of ornament is useful, in softening its lines and mitigating what might, but for it, have been a harsh and brutal contrast between its blackness and the white paper (146).

It has the further use of doing away with the blank unprinted area about it which otherwise would tell as a gap in the type; and may readily be designed to give (and naturally is designed to give) a compact right-lined device ranging con-



145. WOODCUT INITIALS. ITALIAN.



146. WOODCUT INITIALS. GERMAN.

veniently with the lines of the text. Except where the letter itself takes square lines (which it cannot always be made to do), something of the kind seems to be almost necessary. We get by means of such ornamental framing to the initial a rectangular patch of print which there is no overlooking; and within this, attention once called to it, the form of the letter is promptly perceived. Moreover, such uniform patches break the page more pleasantly than initials of varying contour would be likely to do.

Upon this customary tune of a letter involved in ornament, or set in a framework or against a background of ornament, very interesting variations were played throughout the sixteenth century. At times such ornament was made to follow closely the lines of the letter (149), at times to contrast with them (145, 146), at times apparently to take little or no account of them (163); but apparently



147. WOODCUT INITIALS. FRENCH.

only; for the very test of an artist's capacity for such design is that he takes the letter-shape into due consideration, and accommodates the design of his ornament to it. His idea may be only to fill up the interstices with pattern, or to compose contrasting lines, or to correct perhaps the inevitable lines of the letter itself; but, whatever his idea, he must make that the starting point of his design. The devices of the ornamentist in the way of pattern subsidiary to initial lettering are more in number than it would be possible to enumerate. It must suffice to mention a few of them.

The end in view is, usually, by means of ornament, to get a broken background, against which the letter is sufficiently relieved, dark on a lighter tint, or light upon a darker; and it is possible, of course, by the strength or delicacy of the pattern, to give almost any tint to the ground, by its monotony or variety to give almost any degree



148. WOODCUT INITIALS BY G. TORY.

of evenness or unevenness of tint. It is a wide range from solid black ornament to pattern in outline only, from mere diaper to vigorous arabesque or foliage, to say nothing of eventual picture.

A heavy letter against a lighter background of ornament was naturally the first to occur to the artist (146). But he did not stop there. Letters in outline relieve themselves quite enough against a more solid scrollwork, as may be seen in a French alphabet of which two letters are here reproduced (147), where the niello-like enrichment gives importance to otherwise modest initials, even if it does not make them easier to read than they would be without it. This is a case, by the way (others occur in 146, 148), in which the rectangular shape is clearly enough marked without aid of enclosing outline.



149. WOODCUT INITIALS. ITALIAN.

The feat of making black letters clear themselves against a black ground is not so simple; but it is satisfactorily accomplished in sundry Greek initials printed at Venice (149). The letter-shapes are simply emphasised by a double outline of white, and the ground patterned with well-fitting ornament, which not merely reduces it to the value of a tint, but, by the way its detail follows the shape of the interstices, helps to define the form of the letter. In the case of black letters upon a ground in theory black, but so closely covered with white ornament as to give merely a grey tint, there was no difficulty at all in giving force to the black letter.



150. WOODCUT INITIALS. ITALIAN.



151. WOODCUT. FRENCH.

An alternative to this, which suggested itself almost from the first to engravers, was to let the initial stand out white upon the ground of black (150), which might or might not be reduced, by means of white pattern on it, to a tint (151). This filigree of white ornament (142, 151, 152) served also (like the fine white dots with which the black between was often speckled) the very practical purpose of disguising any lack of solidity in the printed patch of black, very likely to occur in printing with hand-presses—vaunt them as we may. Moreover, the simplest thing for the engraver to do, was to cut fine lines of ornament in his wood block (153) and he did it, to very decorative purpose. Such work affords perhaps the first instance of white-line engraving, the invention of which is attributed to Bewick. He, no doubt, cultivated it further, but the orna-



152. WOODCUT. FRENCH.



153. WOODCUT INITIALS. FRENCH.

mentists were before him in the field, and had done good work before he entered it.

The one uniformly unsatisfactory way of relieving a letter against its background is to shade it, whether by merely thickening the outline on one side of it, or by throwing half of it in shadow, as though it stood up upon the page. Theoretically the shading makes the letter "stand out"; but it does not make it more easily readable; it simply vulgarises it. It looks as if in the initials D. I. (154) the rather clumsy outline, black against a background of lines giving a half tint, were meant to suggest relief.

If it is desirable to reduce the volume of white in an initial too assertive on its dark ground, a simple expedient is to introduce into it a central line of black, as frequently was done (153). This may suggest perhaps the idea of incising, but



154. WOODCUT INITIALS.

does not pretend to give the effect of incision. It is odd that many an old engraver should have hesitated between two such opposite opinions, and, in the same series of letters, have rather vulgarised some (152) by shading them and treated others (151) quite tastefully.



155. WOODCUT INITIALS ATTRIBUTED TO LUCAS CRANACH.

XIV. PICTORIAL INITIALS

The initials of the sixteenth-century printers, as will be seen by the illustrations to this as well as to the preceding chapter, are not so much designed by the artist as decorated by him. It is not the letters which he has invented, but the ornament round about them. That may not, strictly speaking, be following the traditions of the days before; but men have a right to initiate, if they like, a practice of their own; and these men, it must be allowed, founded a tradition according to which most excellent work was thenceforth done.

The practice of designing not the initial letter but its decoration, certainly meets the condition, nowadays more insisted upon than ever, of

legibility. When little or no liberty is taken with accepted letter-forms, there is the less danger (if any) of their becoming unreadable. But artists have presumed upon this, seeing no reason, where it was only the background of the letter which was to be designed, why they should not do with it precisely as they pleased, and introduce into it animals, figures, landscapes, or whatever it came into a man's head to draw (156, 157, 158). And, indeed, it is hard to set a limit to the fancy of the



156. WOODCUT INITIALS.

artist. Only, when he goes so far as to lose sight of the fact that it is a background he is designing, he is plainly at fault.

The best men never quite did this, or they would not have been the best. A great designer, such as Holbein for example, designed his figures to compose with the letter; but he would have been freer without having to consider any such arbitrary shape. Who would not rather have that artist's "Dance of Death" (160) without any such encumbrance as the initials to which the



157. WOODCUT INITIALS WITH ANIMALS.

pictures are adapted. The grim episodes in miniature are not the best possible background to the letters, and the letters certainly do not help the pictures. It would have been in every way better to print them as illustrations in the place of initials, with perhaps a modest capital following—a device not yet, so far as I know, followed by the printer. In the case of a Holbein, one accepts the graphic illustration, mixed up as it is with lettering, as something better worth having than merely appropriate ornamental design. The point is, that it is not ornamental. In the hands of lesser artists it is less and less excusable according to their personal insignificance.

The later and more pictorial the work, the more surely the letter becomes a blot upon the



158. WOODCUT INITIALS.

picture, seen through it always at a disadvantage ; but the blame is the artist's, who did not take heed of what he had to do—did not really design, but only drew. His figures appear to be trying to get out of the way of the letter, or the letter looks as if it had been planted in front of them. For the purely pictorial initial there is no excuse. A picture may be more beautiful or more expressive than any mere letter, and it may answer just as well to mark a beginning. In that case, let



159. WOODCUT INITIALS ATTRIBUTED TO HOLBEIN. 1532.

us by all means introduce pictures in the place of initials ; it is hard to see the force of disfiguring them by clapping letters in front of them.

The relationship between picture and design has long been what politicians would call strained ; and, as picture emancipates itself from tradition, the stress becomes always greater. It is easy to imagine lettering that might accompany a picture by, let us say, Mantegna, none which would not clash with one by Sir Joshua, not to mention more recent luminaries in whose light his fame



160. HOLBEIN'S "DANCE OF DEATH."

grows dim. Happily, the modern picture is independent of lettering; it has been left to the advertiser (who is not easily put to shame) to print across it, or on the foreground, or on the sky behind, his name and the description of the wares he has to sell. Why not? it may be asked, if Sir E. Burne-Jones and the old Assyrians are justified. The answer is simple: it all depends upon the scheme and treatment of the picture. The lettering, which is an integral part of the composition, adorns a picture; that which is not, is a blemish upon it. The picture must be such that without the lettering it would be incomplete.

The designers even of the sixteenth century often hesitate between the graphic and the



161. "DANCE OF DEATH" INITIALS, GERMAN.

decorative motive, and especially between the use of arabesque ornament and of figures. They are most completely happy with ornament, but they are happy also with "putti," as the Italians called them, not children precisely, but robust little would-be baby forms playing about, and always playfully presented. Perhaps it is because they are so entirely the children of the artist's brain



162. WOODCUT INITIALS. GERMAN.

that he is so fond of them. Some of the best of these boy figures are attributed to Holbein (159). They measure only about two inches across, but it would be difficult to find, except perhaps in Greek coins of the finest period, larger treatment of design in little.

Another fine alphabet (162) is ascribed to Dürer, on what authority I know not, perhaps because the letters are evidently the work of a strong man not endowed with any very subtle



163. WOODCUT INITIALS WITH MEDALLION HEADS.

appreciation of beauty. It is in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance that Godfrey Sykes designed an alphabet (166) not precisely of initials: the letters are meant to spell inscriptions for the decoration of the refreshment room at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and were executed in glazed majolica—white figures on a yellow ground: the modelling of the figures can be better appreciated in the larger version of the letter S (165). The artist was one who, following in the steps of Alfred Stevens, went back for inspiration to a source it is the fashion with us to neglect just now—by which neglect our modern design is greatly the sufferer.

In the initials of the elder Cranach (155) one



164. WOODCUT INITIALS, WITH ARCHITECTURAL BACKGROUND.

may trace the influence of the goldsmith. They might almost have been designed to be beaten in gold. The excess of ornament—the outline of the letter is well-nigh lost in arabesque—may be taken as indication of the lingering spirit of Gothic art, by this time ultra-florid. It is only at the beginning of the period that the artists of the

Renaissance elaborated the simple Roman form in this way.



165. MAJOLICA LETTER BY
GODFREY SYKES.

The admirable painting alike of ornament and figure in certain illuminated initials does not make them by any means types of what initials should be. The choir books in the Piccolomini Library at Siena are justly famous for the rare beauty of their illumination. The pictures

are perfect miniatures; but, framed in monstrously big initials (141) quite out of scale with the picture, they are miniatures misplaced. The art of design is in putting things in their places, and giving them their right value.

The somewhat impractical idea of framing pictures within enclosing letters has never yet been satisfactorily carried out; but it appears to



166. ALPHABET BY GODFREY SYKES.

have haunted the designers of initials. Most persistent attempts at picture-frame initials were made in 1555 by Mathias Gereon, who designed letters and pictures to be framed by them, which, as may be seen opposite (167), were interchangeable, the same letter D serving as border to two separate pictures. The limits of these little picture blocks, to be inserted in larger blocks, are plainly pronounced by the square lines the pictures take. The expedient of designing letters which will frame any subject, and subjects which will fit any letter, promises economy, no doubt; but it does not fulfil all the conditions of composition: the letter has sometimes to be sacrificed to the picture. In the case of Gereon's S, for instance, a most important section of the initial is eliminated to make room for it. In the series of which examples are here given the printer, indeed, appears to have felt that his initials did not speak for themselves, and has introduced accordingly a little explanatory letter that there might be no mistake about it (167). A more practical, but at the same time quite commonplace, device is that of American printers, who use sometimes, by way of cheap initial, a border or frame of ornament within which movable capitals in large type can conveniently be adjusted; but this has not even the merit of novelty; Plantin was guilty of it before them.

The excessive elaboration of the forms of letters



167. WOODCUT INITIALS BY MATTHIAS GEREON. 1555.

indulged in by the men infected with late Gothic mannerisms, would more than account for artists of severer temper imbued with the spirit of the early Renaissance determining not to tamper with the Roman character, but to emphasise an initial of the accepted and perfected shape merely by ornament round about it. That is not to say theirs is the best or the only way. The letter must arrest attention: it has no other cause or excuse. The easiest way of doing that is to dress it in ornament, as we distinguish an officer by gold lace on his coat, or, if he is very important, by cocks' feathers in his hat. But a man accustomed to command distinguishes himself by his bearing, without regimental finery, and so a finely-designed letter with no trimmings dignifies the head of the column. Alas, that this so seldom happens now! There is, it need hardly be said, no comparison

between the difficulty of inventing a form which shall be at once accepted for the familiar sign and have at the same time a character of its own, of designing, in fact, a new letter, and of devising more or less fitting ornament about an old one.



168. INITIAL.



169. WOOD-CARVING FROM THE BEDCHAMBER OF
HENRI II. AT THE LOUVRE.

XV. LETTERING AND ORNAMENT

It is only natural to assume that lettering, conveying as it necessarily must a meaning, is introduced into ornament only on that account. The ornamentist, who has experience of its use in many an emergency of design, knows better. It has happened to him so often to find that lettering just met a want in design (lettering which but for reasons of composition it would never have occurred to him to introduce), that he does not for a moment doubt that, difficult as it may be to others to believe it, an appreciable amount of the lettering in ornament is addressed in the first

place to the artistic sense, and only in the second to the understanding.

It goes almost without saying, that lettering introduced for reasons of art must satisfy the mind, just as lettering introduced for purposes of explanation must at the same time flatter the eye. It is the business of the artist, having assured himself that lettering is what he wants in his design, to find a good excuse for it; and, with a little wit, he may alight on words so absolutely to the point, that it never occurs to those who have not penetrated the mysteries of the workshop to doubt that they were part of his original scheme, if not its starting-point. My own opinion, based upon personal practice, is, that many a time the modest lettering which takes a subsidiary but not unimportant place in design was, I will not say an afterthought, but a happy thought, which occurred to the artist in the course of developing his idea; and that it was suggested quite as much by the feeling that it was wanted there for effect as by the thought that its meaning would give interest to the design.

And this applies not merely to ornamental lettering. The very unlikeness of plain letters to the usual forms of ornament makes them exceptionally useful in design, as a foil and contrast to it. Without obtruding themselves, they give point to pattern. It is a common experience in design to feel the need of intervals in one's ornament, places



170. CEILING OF THE SALLE DE DIANE AT FONTAINEBLEAU.

of rest to the eye, too important to be treated as background, and in a sense prominent, but not calling for much enrichment. The cartouche, which plays such a prominent part in wood-carving of the period of Henri II., is an outcome of that need, affording as it does a broad surface of wood (not on the same plane with the ground, but itself another ground) which by its position demands decoration, and even decoration which, though it must not attract, shall not be insignificant. The design, in fact, leads up to such points in a way which would logically almost imply a figure composition or some such enrichment; but artistically that would be too rich; what is wanted is something simple, which will not disturb the breadth of surface. Lettering, as may be seen (169, 170), seems just to fill the place. It may be so simple in its lines and so flat in treatment that it barely disturbs the breadth of surface; and yet, when attention is attracted to it, as in such a position it must eventually be, the sense of fitness is not shocked by any inadequacy of detail. In the same way the cypher $\mathcal{O} \text{ I } \mathcal{C}$ (109) just sufficiently fills a space which it is absolutely necessary to keep broad, and yet could not well be left bare. The fact, of course, that an artist could rely upon the vanity of his patron to appreciate the introduction of his cypher, did not make him the less ready to avail himself of the device.



171. GRAVE SLAB FROM LÜBECK.

So with the scroll or label, ostensibly designed always to accommodate inscription, and actually shaped for its accommodation, we cannot doubt that at times the inscription was first thought of only as an excuse for the ornamental label: it is even used at times without the excuse of lettering. A case in point is the elaborate design of H. S. Beham (42). Again, it would probably not have occurred to the designer to introduce the royal motto in connection with the cypher at the end of this chapter (the instinct of the designer is to make his cypher self-sufficient) had he not felt the need of the lines of the scroll to help him in the emergency of combining rather awkward letters.

If, on the one hand, it can seldom be asserted



172. PEW-ENDS FROM A CHURCH IN SOMERSETSHIRE.



173. PEW-ENDS FROM A CHURCH IN SOMERSETSHIRE.

positively that lettering is introduced for ornament's sake, neither, on the other, can we always be sure that the most absolutely appropriate lettering was introduced solely or primarily on account of what it tells us. It is just as likely that the letters on the old English encaustic tiles (177) were thought of as appropriate filling for the spaces in the band, as that the band was devised to take them. The mottoes in the stained glass window illustrated in the introductory chapter (8) may very well have been thought of only as a kind of quarry-pattern. It is more likely that letters were hunted up to fill the shields in the Gothic stall-ends from a Somersetshire church (172, 173) than that the shields were devices

provided for given letters. One or two shields perhaps were wanted to bear certain emblems ; that suggested other shields, for which symbolic filling had to be found. The inscription on the grave slab from Lübeck (171) has, of course, a



174. WOOD-CARVING FROM TRINITY COLLEGE CHAPEL,
CAMBRIDGE.

practical purpose to serve, but none the less it forms a very useful piece of simple, broad decoration between the elaborate ornamentation of the outer border and the fine canopy work round the figure. The problem offered to the artist is, in the one case, to find words so

appropriate, and in the other, to reduce them so absolutely to ornament, that we neither know nor ask how the design came about, but are content



175. SPANISH EARTHENWARE DISH PAINTED IN BLUE
AND LUSTRE.

that he has solved the problem, and, in so doing, given us a thing of beauty.

It can hardly be said that the use of lettering in ornament, whether in the form of plain inscrip-

tion, or of pattern built upon the alphabet, is sufficiently appreciated by modern designers.

Lettering recommends itself to the designer in that, when it comes to design and not mere inscription, he can do with it so nearly as he will. By nature it asserts itself somewhat; its lines, whatever the character, are inclined to distinguish themselves plainly enough from foliage or scroll-work, from animal or human form, with which they may be associated. But there are numberless ways of keeping it in its place, indeed in the precise subordination the artist may desire—ways of distributing the lettering, of shaping its outline, of treating its surface, of entangling it with ornament—any one or more of which may safely be followed.

Allusion has been made already to the breaking up of words capriciously, and to colouring the letters at will (67). They may be made to alternate with ornament, as in the Hispano-Moresque plate (175), a very usual plan; or it may be not words but cyphers in themselves none too intelligible, which alternate with symbolic ornament. That occurs in the collar of the *Saint Esprit* worked into the embroidered cloth of which a portion is here given (176). The design of the collar is adapted also to the border of the cloth, where the larger scale of the design makes it more easy to appreciate how ingeniously the artist has combined his steady and even rigid cyphers with



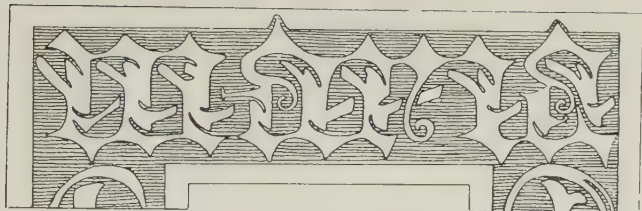
176. EMBROIDERY AT THE HÔTEL CLUNY.

the dancing flames which figure again in the diaper on the field of the cloth. Similar use is made of the cypher in a delightfully simple piece of actual goldsmith's work in the Louvre, in which alternate



177. ENGLISH GOTHIC PAVING TILES.

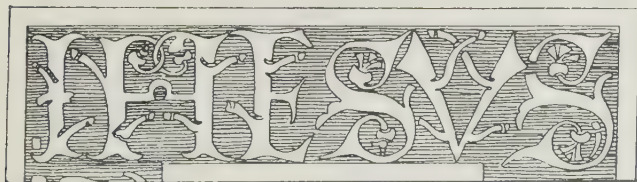
links are formed of a cypher D E. The distribution of the separate letters of a word according to the artist's fancy is another cunning way of sufficiently removing it from bald announcement.



178. FROM THE BACK OF AN OLD GERMAN WOODEN SEAT.

There is no possible mistaking the meaning of the letters studding at precise intervals the velvet binding of Queen Mary's Prayer-book (138); and yet the word "Regina" does not shout at you.

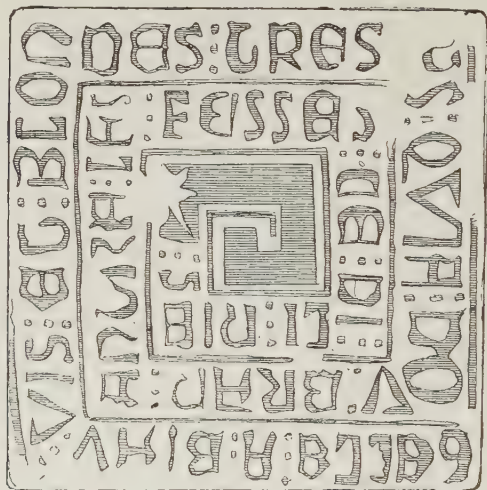
Even straightforward lettering, following the plan, for example, of a Greek fret in the French encaustic tile (180), and making with the sudden patch in the centre most excellent ornament, would never thrust its meaning upon one, even were it upon examination readable, which, in this particular instance, it can hardly claim to be; nor yet the inscription upon the English tile pattern (14). If it was the intention of the artist to announce something in his design, the tidings reach but few;



179. FROM THE BACK OF AN OLD GERMAN WOODEN SEAT.

if it was ornament he meant, there is no mistake about that.

The disguise of lettering in the form of monograms and cyphers has been alluded to already. One looks upon the cyphers tooled upon le Gascon's book cover (110) less as lettering than as diaper.

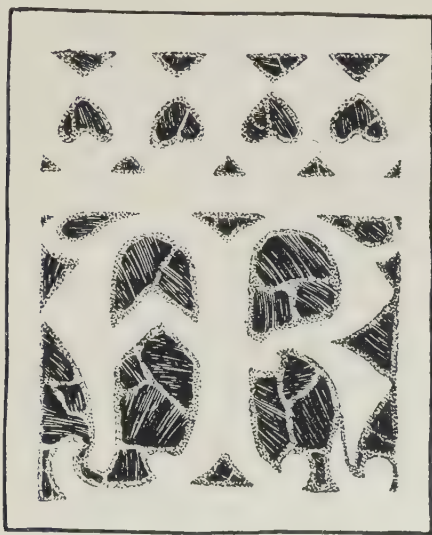


180. OLD FRENCH PAVING TILE.

Even the crowned L sprinkled over the bindings for Louis XIII. asserts itself less emphatically than it would if it occurred singly, and were not used as an ornamental repeat.

The form of lettering can, it is evident, be easily modified to the degree at which it is quite unintelligible; the main difficulty of the designer is in

making ornamental letters which shall not be enigmatical. The foliation of the letter-shape is itself enough to transform it absolutely. But departure from the normal shape should be in the direction of beauty. That is hardly the case in



181. FLINT INLAY FROM A CHURCH IN NORFOLK.

the black-letter which grows out into truncated branches in the words "Jesus" and "Maria" (179, 178), a rustic notion which crops up continually in late German Gothic, but it is never happy.

It is seldom very desirable to break the surface of

lettering with enrichment, unless indeed the idea is to merge it in ornament, to devise a mystery of richest scrollery out of which, as you dwell upon it, the words grow gradually into significance. Van Meckenen did that perfectly in the scrollwork which (66), as at last it dawns upon you, spells his name. He designed also some very elaborate initials (140), in which both the



182. DEVICE OF A Ω AND A CROSS EMBROIDERED IN COUCHED GOLD THREAD.

thickness of the letters and the background enclosed by them is overrun with florid foliage, growing in some cases through from letter to background; but so compact is the ornament, so closely does it accommodate itself to the spaces of one or the other, that, though there is only a

narrow line of demarcation between the two, the shape of the letters is quite clearly enough defined. They are a triumph of florid ornamental design.

Another case in which the surface of lettering is more or less ornamentally treated occurs in ribbon letters, and in black-letters designed somewhat after the fashion of strapwork, turning over at the ends. The more simply this is rendered, the better as a rule it is, but the turn-



183 OLD PAINTED ROOF DECORATION, NORFOLK.

over is not always so conscientiously designed as it might be. Something of the kind occurs also



184. IRONWORK FROM HENRY VII.'S CHAPEL, WESTMINSTER.

in Icelandic lettering (71); but the rendering of the turnover is there more abstract. An equally abstract and singularly happy treatment occurs

in the Arab rendering of Gothic letters (45). In the jewel by Holbein (15), what would in the case of solid gold letters have been obtrusive-



185. WOOD-CARVING FROM AN OLD SCOTTISH CASKET.

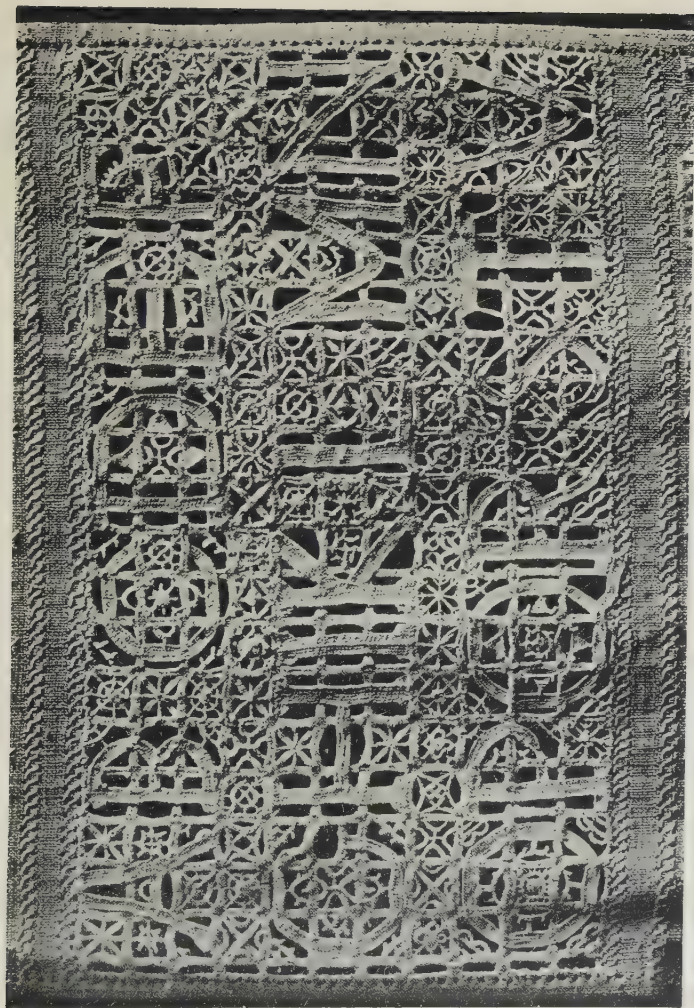
ness, is skilfully avoided by fretting out great part of the body of the letters, not representing them in outline, but leaving just enough of the metal to give shapes not immediately suggestive of letters.

In the gold couching on page 210, the A and Ω are cunningly interwoven with the cross. A severer use of monogram and cypher, in a way which yet does not call undue attention to them, is shown in the painting upon the roof of Sell church (183).

A monogram from another old Norfolk church (181) shows how the form may be quieted by the way it is executed. The ground of the building stone is cut away and broken flints are inlaid. But though the cement jointing makes a sort of outline between the black and the white, it is not continuous; and where there is no background of flint it is left to the eye to make it good.

The confusion of lettering with a background of ornament is easily effected. It is curious how absolutely the crowned letters are kept quiet by the strapwork and floral emblems associated with them in the carving of the pear-tree casket illustrated (185). So, too, in the sampler of cutwork (186) the letters lose themselves in the geometric pattern-stitching in which they are set; and yet, notwithstanding the square lines of both, the natural result of drawing the threads, how plainly they detach themselves from it when you look at the work!

It is a common Oriental practice, as in the mirror-back illustrated (74), to involve letters in ornament which, by its comparatively equal weight, prevents them from asserting themselves,



186. ALPHABET IN CUTWORK FROM AN OLD SAMPLER.

whilst at the same time its broken outline and modelled surface prevent confusion with the sweeping lines and flat face of the inscription. In like manner the ornament behind the texts in the plaster-work of the Alhambra is fretted all over with pattern so that it may not compete on equal terms with it. Elsewhere, as in old Damascus tiles, colour fulfils much the same function as carving. White letters are prevented from standing out stark on a rich blue ground by patterning it over with ornament in paler blue. Much the same thing is seen in sixteenth-century initial letters (151, 152, 153), where the white pattern on the ground, according to its strength and weight, just greys the ground, or helps, if need be, to restore the balance of the composition. It will be seen (187) that the hard effect of flat, sharp-cut letters may be greatly softened by a mere filigree of fine, close, evenly distributed ornament upon the ground, which by its very busy-ness dazzles the sight and so seems to blur their outlines.

Countless other ways of bringing lettering into focus in design will suggest themselves to the artist. It would be impossible to enumerate them all ; and there is no need to do so ; for they are devices not in the least degree peculiar to lettering, but in general use among artists for the purpose of subordinating one feature in ornament to another. Indeed, very much of what is here



187. LETTERING WITH ORNAMENT TO SOFTEN EFFECT.

said applies, not exclusively to lettering in ornament, but to the ornamental treatment of all manner of arbitrary forms. It is one of the difficulties besetting the discussion of any side issue of ornament, that it is practically impossible to refrain from wandering continually off into the



188. DEVICE OF LABEL, CROWN
AND V R.

broader question of design, taste, art in short—so true it is that art is one. In theory. In practice the arts are many ; and what is called general training in art is at most bare preparation for the pursuit of the least among them.

Hence the occasion, or at all events the excuse, for books dealing in detail, as this does, with quite

a subsidiary branch of ornamental design. They will not teach the artist his trade, nor save him the labour of design; but they may at least prevent his going far astray; and even the theories he is least prepared to accept may start him on some not unprofitable train of thought upon which, but for timely provocation, it would never have occurred to him to embark.

It is in that hope that the present book is written; not with any desire to impose the convictions of the writer upon others, but with the belief that the plain statement of what may be no more than the personal opinions of a worker of many years' experience will be helpful to workmen.

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